Things Just Ain't the Same Any Time the Hunter Gets Captured by the Game
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Things Just Ain't the Same Any Time the Hunter Gets Captured by the Game

by barspoon

Summary

This Story has been translated into Chinese. The link is on my profile.

KakaNaru. Post-war, Naruto is 18. When a friendship that turns into a bromance trips over an awkward series of events before stumbling into romance because Kakashi won't look where he's going, Naruto never pays attention, Kurama is antagonistic and meddlesome, and their friends are scheming ninjas, this is what happens.

SPOILERS up to manga chapter 654, and an obvious deviation from canon soon after that point! I also made up a lot of stuff, so if you're not caught up to that chapter just pretend I made everything up! =D

This is rated 'Mature' mostly for the cussing, and I'll post notes at the beginning of chapters for any other warnings you need to be wary of. The 'Explicit Sexual Content' is contained within one chapter, and I'll be posting a lengthy warning for that as well. Please...PLEASE read the author notes!

I highly recommend reading the companion piece to this story, 'Certain Things Rearrange...', after each chapter or at the end of the story.

Windswept Grass and Sunlight

Mother Nature was such a tease during the spring. You get excited about how nice the weather is, the scent of new things growing out of the soft dark earth is so intoxicating it makes you forget all about last spring, you frolic happily back home after a long mission because – by some miracle – you have the next day off, and just as you open your eyes to greet a sparklingly perfect morning of sunshine and butterflies the heavens bitch-slap you with a cold rainy day for being such a dumbass.

Kakashi let out a heavy sigh, giving the rain pelting his window a flat annoyed look from where he lay sprawled on his bed in a sleeveless shirt and dark slacks. The first half of the day hadn't been so bad. He'd entertained himself with his favorite books, and had managed to almost feel as if the walls of his tiny apartment weren't pressing in on him like a cage. However, his disappointment at the weather had lingered on, and he'd been forced to give up reading due to the twinges of jealousy that had started after a few hours.

Seriously...how low did you have to be to get jealous of the characters in a porn novel?! He gave another aggravated sigh, more directed at himself than anything, and turned on his side to stare at the door. He was bored to begin with, and damn it now he was lonely. 99% of the time being alone, and even lonely, was comfortable. He had gone as far as to request his new apartment be built in a small storage building so he wouldn't have neighbors. Solitude was as comfortable as wearing his mask. It was so intrinsically rooted into who he was that he honestly felt almost creeped out at the idea of sharing a place with someone else. Unfortunately, he felt like 1% of his usual self at the moment.

Lifting his hands from where they were dangling off the edge of the bed, he looked at them with his one open eye. He idly considered the idea of getting rid of his boredom and loneliness the old fashioned way, and then let his hands flop back down. No go. He didn't have the motivation for that at the moment. The front door seemed to mock him, laughing at how he was stuck staring at it. He suddenly started wishing someone would knock on that arrogant door. Or maybe kick it in. That would be an interesting break from the monotony.

It felt like the gloomy day was infecting him, sapping his will to do anything but lay there like a damp rag. He thought about leaving for his next mission early. He kept thinking about it for several minutes, but he honestly wasn't looking forward to the lone grueling assignment so his motivation to move remained at 0. He looked down at his hands again and formed a few quick seals, then held his right arm out so his palm was facing the door.

"Summoning Jutsu: Company," Kakashi said forcefully, willing someone – *anyone* – to spontaneously appear.

There was a polite rap on the door and the Jounin practically jumped out of his skin. He tumbled gracelessly to the floor, hitting his shoulder and back hard as his feet got tangled in his blanket. He simply lay there half upside-down for a few long seconds, looking at the ceiling in disbelief while his brain hit the reset button.

"Kakashi-sensei...?" Naruto's voice called hesitantly as the door cracked open an inch. The noise of the rain pounding on the small outside awning and pouring off onto the floor of the second-story walkway invaded the room loudly. "Um...is everything okay in there...?"

"Yeah," he replied blankly. There was another long pause, and he turned his head to look at the door as Naruto peeked around it with a somewhat befuddled expression. His wet hair clung to his cheeks and dripped into his eyes without the forehead protector there to keep it back. "Did you need something?"

"Sort of," the blonde replied, stepping into the entranceway. His clothes were plastered to his lean frame, heavy and soaked from the rain.

"Why are you so wet?" Kakashi asked, confused as to why the younger shinobi wasn't at least carrying an umbrella with him on a day like that.

"Hinata still has my umbrella," he shrugged, unzipping his coat and peeling it off. "Why are you on the floor?"

"I was trying a new summoning jutsu."

"How's that working out?" Naruto asked with slightly concerned curiosity as he reached his arms out the door to wring most of the water from his jacket.

"It's surprisingly effective," he said, pushing himself onto one elbow so he could untangle his feet and stand up. He walked the short distance to his washroom, grabbed a clean towel, and tossed it to Naruto. "Here."

"Thanks." After catching the towel, he clamped it in his teeth and struggled out of his wet shirt.

"You finished your mission early," Kakashi said as he rifled through his dresser for a shirt and pair of trousers. "Iruka said you wouldn't be back for another couple days."

"Nmm, i' 'ash eashier 'an 'e fought," Naruto mumbled through the towel before finally wriggling free of his clinging shirt. "I got into a big fight with Kiba, though," he said solemnly, slinging the towel around his neck so he could wring his shirt out.

"And this is new how...?" Kakashi drawled, setting the dry clothes on the short step between the entranceway and the room proper. He picked the damp coat up and then held his hand out for the shirt before the blonde could toss it on the floor as well. "Hand it over," he glowered subtly as Naruto hesitated and glanced at the folded dry clothes in surprise. "Some of us don't appreciate it when our homes look like a wet hobo just invaded."

"Ah, sorry," he chuckled guiltily, relinquishing the shirt and scrubbing his hair with the towel.

"So? What was the fight about?" The Jounin asked as he walked back into the washroom. There was a significant lack of response while he ran a length of wire from two high hooks on opposite sides of the tile walls in the shower. "That's what's bothering you, isn't it?" He

prompted, draping the jacket and shirt over the wire before stepping back into the one-room apartment.

"Yeah..." Naruto said quietly, shaking out his slacks under the awning from where he was hiding behind the barely open door in his shorts.

Kakashi waited in silence on the step, idly noting that the young man had filled out a bit more over the past year. He would never be as muscular as Gai or Lee, but he also wasn't as slight as Sai. If he had one last unexpected growth spurt, he might get as tall as Iruka.

"Hey, Kakashi-sensei," Naruto said, a scowl of conflict on his face as he handed over his trousers. "Do you think I'm a glory hound?"

The silver-haired man's eye widened for a moment in surprise as he took the wet clothing. "Kiba called you that?" He asked neutrally, walking into the washroom to hang the clothing on the wire.

"He said he hated going on missions with me because all I did was show off how strong I'd gotten. You get upset with me sometimes when Team 7 does missions, saying I'm over-doing things. But you've never accused me of showing off."

"Because you don't," Kakashi shrugged, stepping back into the room and leaning against the doorframe of the washroom.

"That's what I told Kiba, but he didn't believe me!" He stuffed his legs angrily into the dark trousers and tied the drawstring at his waist. The extra length of material pooled around his heels. "He kept going on about me being a glory hound, and how he wasn't there just to be used as a stepping stone. After he left even Shino got on my case! He said I was holding them back!" He railed, hurling the damp towel to the floor. "How is that even possible?! The whole point of getting stronger in the first place was so I *wouldn't* hold anyone back!"

"Oi," Kakashi said firmly, pointing at the towel. Naruto grumbled an apology and tossed the towel to the Jounin. "I'm going to take a wild stab at this," he said, reaching into the washroom to hang the white cloth over the rack on the wall. "You saw Kiba get into a bit of a pinch, and then you rushed in to help."

"And then he got all pissed off at me for it!"

"You're holding him back."

"WHAT?!" Naruto raged, fists clenched at his sides and blue eyes flashing.

"Ah, well, maybe that's not quite an accurate way to say it," Kakashi mused calmly, tilting his head back to look at the ceiling. "It's more like you're standing in front of him, preventing him from moving forward."

"What?" Naruto asked, his temper cooling as confusion set in.

"You don't want to see anyone get hurt, so you always jump in front," he said, looking back at the blonde. "It's an admirable trait, wanting to protect everyone, but if you take it too far then

you're only holding people back. You keep them behind you, blocking the danger from the front. However, with you standing in front of them, they can't move forward. They can't even stand beside you."

"...I see," he replied softly, the dawning realization washing away the last of his anger. He lowered his eyes and absently scratched his bare arm. "It's not going to be easy, is it? Stepping aside."

"Nope."

"Why didn't you tell me this stuff before?"

"I did. You wouldn't listen," Kakashi said wryly.

"Ahhah," Naruto sighed, lifting his arms and letting them flop to his sides. "I guess I'll just have to learn to get used to it. When I'm Hokage I'll be doing nothing but watching the backs of everyone as they go on missions, instead of them watching mine."

"When the hell did you get so old?" Kakashi arched an eyebrow, startled at the maturity of the statement.

"Eh?" Naruto gave the Jounin a quizzical look, leaning down to pick up the folded shirt on the step. "I turned 18 in October. We had a big party and destroyed half a block because Fuzzy Brows and Kiba got their drinks mixed up with Aoba and Tsunade baa-chan's sake. Don't you remember?"

"I stand corrected," he drawled. "Yes, I do remember that nightmare now, thank you."

"It was a great party," the youth grinned, pulling the shirt over his head and slipping his arms through the sleeves.

His hands didn't quite make it out of the ends, and he paused to scowl in mute disappointment at the four fingertips peeking out of the dark fabric. Kakashi snerked involuntarily, covering the mask over his mouth with his hand. Naruto's cheeks flushed pink as he snapped his head around to glare heatedly at the taller Jounin. Kakashi bit his lip as his shoulders shook with helpless laughter, the blonde's furiously embarrassed face turning bright red.

"Shut up!" Naruto fumed, pushing the sleeves up to his elbows.

"Wait, wait," Kakashi choked and waved his hand, doubling over slightly as he desperately tried to keep the laughter contained and stumbled toward his dresser. "I'll get you a t-shirt."

"I don't need one!"

A foot connected with the Jounin's back and he toppled over onto his side, limp with overwhelming amusement in the space between his bed and the dresser. He looked up at the tomato-red picture of enraged humiliation, then down at the bare feet half covered with the extra length of dark fabric, and just busted out laughing.

"Shut up!" Naruto shouted, pushing his heel into Kakashi's shoulder and kicking him somewhat forcefully onto his back. "Stupid scarecrow," he growled, stalking away and sitting angrily on the bed. "Not everyone is as freakishly tall as you are, you know!"

"I'm...I'm not that...tall," he gasped, clutching his sides.

"SHUT UP!"

A book came flying over the edge of the bed, the spine hitting Kakashi right between the eyes and bouncing to the floor. "...ow..." he snickered, taking deep breaths as his laughter abated. The sounds of objects shuffling and moving made him turn his head, but he couldn't see with the bed in the way. "What are you doing over there?"

"Looking for a pair of scissors."

"Oi!" Kakashi lurched to his side and grabbed the edge of the bed to pull himself up. Another book slammed into his face and dropped to the mattress.

"You're a surprisingly easy target on your own turf," Naruto grinned impishly, sitting on the floor in front of the small bookcase next to the bed.

"You're a not-so-surprisingly horrible guest..." Kakashi said flatly, giving the blonde a deadpan look of irritation.

Naruto just laughed remorselessly and turned back to examining the contents of the bookcase. "You know, I thought this would all be porn, but you've actually got real books here."

"Why thank you," he responded drolly as he picked up the two books that had been thrown at him. "They come in handy for research from time to time."

"Oohhh...?" Naruto mused suspiciously.

Kakashi walked up to the young man and rapped him over the head with the two books. He gave a satisfied smirk at the yelp of pain, then leaned forward to slide the books back onto the shelf. Undaunted, Naruto rubbed his head with one hand and trailed the fingers of his other over the various titles. Kakashi glanced down as he straightened back up, a little amazed at how comfortable Naruto was making himself as he rooted through the Jounin's belongings. He wondered if he should tell the blonde he was being rude, then shrugged indifferently and turned around to walk to his 'kitchen'.

The kitchen consisted of a small personal fridge sitting on the floor in the corner next to the washroom. Directly above it was a shelf that held a metal teapot and a one-burner portable range, and above that was a cupboard. Kakashi picked up the teapot and filled it in the washroom. When he walked out Naruto had turned around where he sat to face the Jounin, waving a book in front of him with a highly amused expression.

"How is haiku research material?"

"It's an old code key from when I was in ANBU," he replied, setting the pot on the burner and turning the flame on.

"Really? Can you teach it to me?"

"Why?" Kakashi asked, giving the young man a bemused look.

"It might come in handy one day," Naruto said, flipping slowly through the pages.

Kakashi had a sudden and uncomfortable image of Jiraiya's dying message flash into his head. "Okay." Shit! He'd meant to say 'no'.

"Thanks!" He beamed.

"Yeah, no problem," Kakashi sighed in resignation. "First thing you have to do is memorize that book."

"Huh?! Why? If I have the key, why do I need to memorize it?"

"You want me to teach you the code or not?" He scowled over his shoulder, reaching into the cupboard for a cup and a squat canister of tea.

"I got it, I got it," Naruto said hurriedly, closing the book and setting it aside. "I'll have it memorized in a week."

"Very bold of you to set such an unrealistic goal."

"Hey!" He protested.

"But you'll have to wait a month before I teach you anything," Kakashi continued, sliding his hands in his pockets as he turned around and leaned against the wall to wait for the water to heat.

"Figures," Naruto sighed, flopping onto his back and propping his feet up on the edge of the bed. Kakashi noticed he'd rolled the cuffs of the slacks to just above his ankles. "Who're you going on the mission with?"

"No one."

"You're going alone?" He asked, rolling his head to look up at the Jounin with a bit of concern.

"Some missions are like that," Kakashi shrugged nonchalantly.

"Where are you going?"

"Can't say."

"Why not?"

"Because it's an S-Rank mission and I can't say."

"I won't tell anyone else."

"That's not the point."

"Why won't you tell me?"

"Why do you even want to know?" Kakashi asked, starting to get annoyed and a little unnerved at the way Naruto was asking the questions and watching him with such a clear serious expression. Those eyes seemed to look straight through him...it was eerie

"I don't know," Naruto narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

Kakashi dropped his head in exasperation. "Then stop asking..."

"Want me to come with you?"

The Jounin lifted his chin and gazed at the blonde on his floor in perplexed irritation. "No. I do not want you to come with me. Would you like me to shove this hot teapot in your face?"

"No."

"Good, we have an agreement," he growled, pushing off the wall and turning his attention to the steaming teapot.

"Why don't I get any solo missions?"

"Because you're reckless," Kakashi answered bluntly, pouring the tea and grabbing a bag of rice crackers from the cupboard.

"It's not going to be easy fixing that, either," Naruto sighed, rolling back to a sitting position.

The response startled Kakashi enough to make him pause briefly as he handed the teacup and crackers to Naruto. "You shouldn't think of it that way. It's not something that needs to be 'fixed', it just needs to be...tempered."

"'Tempered'?" He lifted an eyebrow as he took a sip of tea. "I thought my temper was part of the problem."

"Think of it like the stages of learning rasengan," the Jounin said, glossing over the word confusion and stepping past Naruto to search the bookcase for the deck of cards he was pretty sure he still had. He needed something to distract the persistent youth. It'd be a while before his clothes dried. "Right now you're in the last stage before it's complete. You don't need to actually change anything about yourself, you just need to contain it a bit."

"The last stage was the hardest," the blonde grumbled, crunching on a rice cracker.

"It always is," Kakashi shrugged. "And this time you can't just summon a clone to make it work."

"Mmm," Naruto tipped his head back thoughtfully, leaning back

on his hands and looking up at the taller man. "I don't think I need one, though."

"Aren't we the philosophical little pestilence today," he said, placing the deck of cards on the upturned face and walking by to sit down across from him. "You've been hanging around Shikamaru recently."

"I helped him baby-sit last week," he grinned, taking the cards out of their pack and shuffling them. "Kurenai-sensei's kid is hilarious if you give her candy."

"You're a demon..."

"That's what Shikamaru said right before he passed out on the couch," Naruto snickered, placing four stacks of cards on the floor between them. "Kurenai-sensei seemed pretty happy to come back to a quiet house, though. Okay!" He clapped his hands together, then picked up five cards from the stack nearest to him. "If I beat you at Speed, you treat me to Ichiraku when you get home from your mission."

Kakashi narrowed his eye, considering the bet. "All right, but we play straight. No chakra use."

"Deal. You are so not leaving here with your wallet intact, old man."

"Bring it, punk," Kakashi shot back, picking up his five cards.

After the Jounin won five straight games, Naruto finally cracked.

"YOU'RE CHEATING!" He raged, throwing his last card down and flinging his arms in the air.

"Stop shouting. And how am I cheating?" Kakashi countered with a calm chuckle, leaning over to sweep up the playing cards.

A pair of overly-intense blue eyes were suddenly a few inches from his own, which startled him into freezing still for a heartbeat. Something irrational flashed into his mind for a split-second, but was quashed before it even formed into a proper thought. All that lingered was a sense of unease and the urge to move. Kakashi gave him a flat look, straightening back up to put some distance between them. Naruto's eyes narrowed, burning their way through the Jounin with unabated suspicion and determination.

"I don't know, but I'll figure it out," he huffed, crossing his arms. The serious expression was gone in a blink as his stomach decided to ruin the highly serious moment.

"Rice crackers just aren't good enough for you, huh?" Kakashi needled with dry humor, setting the cards aside.

"Sorry," Naruto replied with an embarrassed yet shameless grin, scratching the back of his head while his cheeks turned a light pink.

"Can't be helped, I suppose," he shrugged, pushing himself to his feet and stepping to the small cupboard above the range. "Here," he said, tossing a pear over his shoulder.

"Ah, thanks!"

He gave a silent laugh at the fact that there were no complaints about the pear not being ramen in disguise. Grabbing another pear for himself, he kept his back turned to quickly slip his mask and take a bite of the fruit before turning back around. The movement was fast enough and so unexpected he literally jumped back half a step in shock, almost choking on the food in his mouth. Naruto was standing six inches from him, his lean body rigid with excitement and his face blazing with an almost frantic curiosity.

What the fuck?!

Struggling to swallow the bite of pear that was threatening to kill him, Kakashi placed his empty palm square in the middle of the young man's chest and firmly pushed him back so he was an arm's length away. While there wasn't any real resistance to his hand, Naruto also didn't shy away from the touch, obviously determined to stay just as close as he possibly could to catch a glimpse of the face beneath the mask.

"What are you doing?!" Kakashi coughed. He kept his elbow locked, not sure if it was safe yet to remove the hand that was keeping this bizarre wild creature at bay.

"You're eating!" Naruto replied, as if it answered all questions in the known universe.

"It's my food, of course I'm eating it," the Jounin said, cautiously pulling his hand back. There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence, where neither he nor Naruto moved.

"Well, go on, keep eating," Naruto urged.

"I am not going to eat with you staring at me like that," Kakashi scowled.

"Stingy!"

"That's right, I am," he sighed, resting his face in his hand. "Just sit d-"

"Henge!"

Kakashi rolled his eye and gave the cloud of smoke a flat look. "...really?"

"Kakashi-sensei, aren't you hungry...?" A feminine voice purred enticingly as the smoke cleared and the naked woman stepped forward.

The Jounin's eye widened in horror as he took a reflexive step back. Shit. This wasn't the squeaky-voiced wide-eyed flirt from years ago, this was a seriously dangerous god damn vixen! Her golden hair was loose, trailing down her bare back and framing her face in wispy strands. Sultry half-lidded blue eyes watched him with an eagerness and hunger that had nothing to do with eating food. Shit! Her body heat tingled across his bare arms as she leaned closer, and he died a little inside as his blood started to warm up. SHIT!

"I've lost my appetite..." Kakashi growled behind clenched teeth, glaring and refusing to look anywhere beyond her face. Flashes of irrationality began to pick at his nerves like crows on a carcass. How long had it been? He felt sick to his stomach.

"Mmm...that's too bad," the blonde woman sighed sadly, casting her eyes down sensuously and licking her lips. "Are you sure you don't want to eat something...?"

"Not! Happening!" Kakashi spat out. Juice dripped from his knuckles where his fingers had dug harshly into the pear, and he tried to focus on the pain of his nails digging into the palm of his other hand. It wasn't even about whether he'd take his mask off or not anymore. He couldn't risk moving at all with her that close to him, he had to concentrate! He wanted to throw up.

"Just one bite..." she whispered, looking up at him from beneath her eyelashes as she tilted her head at the perfect angle so a lock of her long hair swept across the side of her face.

"Change back, now!" He snapped. He wanted to touch her. I'll kill you! He wanted to devour her. *I'll kill you!* He wanted her to scratch her nails down his back till he bled. *I'LL KILL YOU!* He wanted to hear her screaming his name. ***I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU!*** Squeezing his eye shut, he retreated to the darkness till it was over.

"Don't you want a little taste...?"

Fingertips slid across the backs of both his hands, and Kakashi flinched violently at the touch. His eye flew open as he stumbled back, his assailant's expression going instantly from heated seduction to surprise and guilt. His empty hand was already swinging out wildly, his fingers just missing the woman's cheek and slipping through a lock of her loose hair as Kakashi desperately tried to throw his momentum backward with the movement.

Her eyes didn't even blink at the near contact, guilt shifting to concern. He tried to catch his balance, his heel contacting the floor heavily and sending a jolt through his bones that buckled his knee. The woman disappeared into a puff of smoke as Kakashi hit the floor on his side. In an instant he was up on his knees and plunging an arm into the smoke. His hand connected with Naruto's side just above his waist, and he grabbed onto it. Hard.

"Ow...Kakashi-sensei, that hurts!"

"You've improved your transformation, you twisted little shithead," Kakashi said in a low voice, glaring lethally at Naruto as the smoke cleared.

"Eh-heh, you noticed?" He winced, trying to laugh while cringing in pain at the same time.

"Yeah, I noticed," the sliver-haired man said darkly, digging his thumb deep into the toned flesh between Naruto's ribs so he dropped to his knees with a gurgle of agony. "Here...you were hungry, right? Don't you want a little taste?!" He snarled gleefully, cramming what remained of the pear in his other hand into the blonde's mouth.

Naruto's arms flailed, muffled protests going unheard as Kakashi let go of his side and gave a ferocious shove at the pear-covered face. Naruto flew across the floor, slamming into the far wall with enough force to knock a few books off the shelf next to him. Sucking air through his teeth, Kakashi furiously turned his attention inward to calm his racing heart and clear his mind while his guest dealt with the consequences of his actions. He pointedly ignored

Naruto's coughing and gasping, dragging himself to the near wall and leaning back against it with his knees drawn up so he could rest his arms on them.

"You could've killed me!" Naruto wailed in protest, springing to his knees as he wiped his face clean on his borrowed shirt and gingerly held his bruised side.

Kakashi leveled a black look in the blonde's direction, his mind scrolling through the thousands of ways he could actually kill the young man. "You ever pull that shit on me again and I will," he replied quietly. The over-dramatic expression of horrified terror on Naruto's face as he threw one arm up in front of him as if to ward off an attack was priceless enough to make the Jounin's stomach clench painfully.

He took a deep breath, closed his eye, bowed his head, and concentrated on swallowing against the urge to vomit. He was disgusting. He'd let his guard down because he hadn't expected to see something he actually craved, and his wretched body had fallen into the trap. It wasn't like he'd never faced that kind of woman before and cooly brushed her off if he wasn't in the very rare mood to give in to his desire to rustle the sheets. But that had been Naruto! *Fucking **NARUTO**!*

Finally managing to settle his stomach after who knew how long, he was abruptly aware of a radiating warmth in front of his feet. His first thought was that the sun had come out, spilling on the floor in front of him, but he could still hear the rain pelting the window. He opened his eye and glared daggers at the back of a familiar dark shirt. Naruto was lying on his side, head resting on the floor as he quietly flipped through the pages of the haiku book.

Kakashi thought it might feel really really great to kick him with as much force as he could. He paused and sighed, knowing that was exactly what the blonde had intended. Placing his feet against the openly offered back, he simply straightened his legs to slide the young man away. Naruto's only reaction was to close the book, and Kakashi let his arms flop onto his lap while his feet rested against the warm back.

"Sorry," Naruto said, not moving.

"You should be," Kakashi grumbled.

"That's the first time I've used that version on anyone. I didn't expect her to do nothing but piss you off."

...'do nothing but piss you off'?... Kakashi's eye widened, a glimmer of hope breaking through the clouds. ...thank you, god, for making him so dense!...

"You know, your feet are really cold," Naruto said, his shoulder twitching uncomfortably. "Is there something wrong with the way your blood flows?"

"No," he replied, tilting a wicked grin and bracing his arms against the wall. "What, you thought it was just a metaphor when people described me as having ice in my veins?"

"Well, yeaaAAAAHHHHGHH!"

Kakashi's feet were up the back of the shirt in time to cut off the response, and he slid forward a bit to get enough leverage to pin the wriggling youth down under his icy toes.

"Holy shit, cold! OW! That's my sore rib, damn it!" He kicked out his legs to squirm away, batting at Kakashi's legs till he at last managed to get out of range and sit up.

"I should have broken it," Kakashi chuckled maliciously, slumping against the wall with his legs sprawled out in front of him. Forgiving the blonde idiot scowling indignantly at him was far too easy. "You're lucky I've gotten soft in my old age."

"'Soft', my ass," Naruto growled, grabbing the collar and bottom of the large shirt to rub his back like a towel. "And what's with the 'old' crack? You've been hanging around Gai-sensei too much. What are you, 28? 29?"

"32," the Jounin sang, holding out two fingers like a victory sign.

"So...when I'm 20, you'll be 34? That's not super old."

"Ooooh, it can do math without pen and paper!" Kakashi cooed and smiled with mock sweetness, drawing one knee up to rest his forearm on it.

"Bite me!"

"Ah, but I'm 58 in shinobi years," he said thoughtfully, completely ignoring the waspish retort.

"And how do you figure that?" The blond asked dryly.

"Every day you wear that symbol, you're two days nearer death," the Jounin tapped his forehead meaningfully.

"That's an awfully morbid way of looking at it..."

"Morbid but true," Kakashi smiled subtly. "Did you know the ANBU masks started as a superstition to ward off the shinigami? Spies and assassins have very short life spans because their missions constantly court death. They would make 'false faces' in the shape of masks to fool the shinigami, believing their souls wouldn't be reaped if the death god couldn't recognize their true face."

"Wow..." Naruto said softly, eyes wide as he listened raptly.

"Well, but that was long before Konoha existed. The tradition just kept getting passed down even after the original purpose was discarded as ridiculous. The masks are worn now for reasons that have nothing to do with that old tale," he shrugged. "It's just a uniform that's used for recognition and intimidation, as well as hiding the person's true identity."

"Do you still have your mask?"

"Nah, I tossed it after I left ANBU," Kakashi flicked his fingers dismissively. "There was no reason to keep it."

"Aww nuts! I wanted to see it," Naruto huffed, picking up the deck of cards still stacked near the foot of the bed.

"I've been retired long enough, there's probably someone else wearing a mask just like it."

"I don't want to see a copy of the Copy Ninja's mask, I want to see the Copy Ninja's mask."

Kakashi pointed at the cloth mask covering his face and smiled brightly. Naruto gave him a flat look and flicked a card at him like a shuriken. The Jounin caught it between his fingers without changing his expression, and then balanced it on its corner at the end of his index fingertip. Naruto's eyes widened at the trick, and he immediately attempted to do it himself. Distraction tactic #2: Successful!

The Jounin canted his head with an amused and somewhat patronizing smile as he watched the younger shinobi trying to balance the card on his fingertip without using chakra. His expression did what it was supposed to do; provoke Naruto's stubborn nature into shutting out everything but the desire to succeed at the task in front of him. Kakashi let his smile falter slightly when he was sure Naruto wasn't paying the smallest bit of attention to him. He couldn't recall the last time he'd had such a long casual conversation with anyone, let alone Naruto, and the odd way it flowed comfortably from absurd to serious was a little disconcerting.

"Rrrrrgh, fine! You win!" Naruto shouted, grabbing the card and holding it out like a kunai. "How'd you do that?!"

"You owe me a deck of cards," Kakashi smirked.

"Eh?!"

"Come on, say it."

"Pff, all right, whatever. I owe you a deck of cards."

"Chakra control," Kakashi flicked his wrist, splaying his fingers to show how the card stuck to his fingertip like it was glued there.

"...I hate you..." Naruto said after a long pause, hunching his shoulders and leveling a flat dark look at the Jounin.

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Kakashi grinned challengingly.

"It's just like climbing trees, so it can't be that hard."

"You think so?" Pushing off the wall, he leaned against his leg to rest his chin on his knee and idly flipped the card between his fingers.

"Of course," the blonde scoffed, forming the one-handed seal for building chakra. "I just have to-" *POP* The card he'd placed on his fingertip flew up toward the ceiling in several pieces.

"You just have to suppress your chakra..."

"I know that," Naruto groused.

POP

"Ahhh, I'm not so sure you do."

"Shut up!"

POP

"You're not suppressing it.

"Yes, I am."

POP

"Bury it deeper."

"I am!"

POP

"Are you even trying to hold back?"

"Of course I am!"

POP

"It doesn't look like you are..."

"Stop bugging me, I'm trying to concentrate!"

POP

"Your concentration sucks."

"Zip it!"

POP

"Oooh, that one really exploded. It's like a party in here."

"Stop distracting me, damn it!"

POP

"Stop letting me distract you."

"Shut up!"

POP

"You're going to help me clean this mess up."

"I will shove this mess down your throat if you don't pipe down!"

POP

"Is that any way to talk to your charming host?"

"Host this!" Naruto snapped, dropping one finger on his seal briefly to flip the Jounin off.

"If you insist," Kakashi replied affably, smoothly getting to his feet and walking the few paces to where Naruto was sitting.

"Huh?" Naruto blinked in confusion, eying the Jounin somewhat suspiciously as the man knelt down in front of him. "What are you going to do?"

"Host you. Here," Kakashi said, putting his fingers against Naruto's palm to complete the chakra-building seal.

The warm hand flinched almost imperceptibly from his touch, and Kakashi hesitated. It surprised him that deep down he felt a little hurt at the rejection. There wasn't enough time to pull his hand away and explain what he was trying to do, because Naruto's fingers curled firmly around his own to complete the seal.

"Okay, now what?" Naruto asked

"I'm going to build chakra in my fingers, just like this," he said, balancing his card on his free finger to demonstrate. "Can you feel it?"

"...not really..." Naruto squinted at the wall as he focused.

"Exactly," Kakashi smiled sweetly, tapping Naruto on the forehead with his card. "Now, mimic it."

The younger shinobi closed his eyes and took a deep breath as he built up his chakra. Kakashi felt the hair on his arms stand up at the amount of chakra resonating through Naruto's hand. He grimaced but kept silent, focusing on maintaining his own chakra so it wouldn't get disrupted and throw off Naruto's concentration. The blonde's brow started to furrow as he struggled to ratchet down his power output. Kakashi could feel it notch down bit by bit, then it would flare slightly before being reined back in. Naruto's scowl deepened, and Kakashi could sense the building frustration making the young man's chakra fluctuate even more.

"I swear, you're distracting me even when you're *not* talking," Naruto said with impatient irritation, quickly cupping Kakashi's hand in both of his own and leaning forward to blow hot air over the Jounin's fingers.

"*What the fuck are you doing?!"* Kakashi snatched his hand away, scrambling back a little and staring at the blonde with absolute disbelief.

"Your hand is freezing, I can't concentrate," he replied matter-of-factly, leaning forward onto his knees and reaching toward the somewhat horrified Jounin. "Give it back, it'll be fine once I've warmed it up."

"I refuse! Lesson's over!" Kakashi slapped Naruto's hand away and then placed his foot in the middle of the young man's chest to keep him back. His mind reeled with the inconceivable weirdness of the situation.

"But I was starting to get it. Come on, just give me a couple more minutes," Naruto insisted, putting his hand on Kakashi's knee as he prepared to climb over the leg holding him back while still reaching for the Jounin's hand.

Kakashi felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up at the pressure on his knee, his pulse jumping as he watched a worst case scenario start to unfold in front of him. Shit, this impulsive fool was dangerous to be around! He used a burst of chakra to maneuver himself out of the precarious position. It happened in the blink of an eye: he swiveled his hips, dropped his knee, pushed off the floor with his palm, kicked his leg out to turn the momentum into a spin, tucked his feet, and landed in a crouch on Naruto's back. No longer having anything to grab onto or hold him up, Naruto slammed into the floor face-first with Kakashi's full weight on his back.

"It's called 'hosting' for a reason," Kakashi said rigidly, giving the blonde head a wary look. "That technique has you acting like a parasite, learning from the host directly instead of learning on your own. I only did it because there was no other way you'd understand how much you'd need to suppress and control your chakra for that trick." Stepping off the young man, he leaned over and hauled Naruto up to his feet by the back of his shirt collar. "But now that you know, you can figure it out on your own," he said, marching Naruto to the washroom and pushing him in. "In your own place. Change. Your clothes should be dry enough by now."

He pulled the door shut on any protests and sagged bonelessly against the shelf that held his range. It was half his fault, and he knew it. Sighing, he started picking up the scattered bits of colorful paper strewn all over the floor. He'd been impulsive as well, and with that unpredictable wild creature in his house he really should have known better. The afternoon had been mostly enjoyable, if a bit traumatizing, and he wanted to end it now before it got too far out of hand. Next time he'd be better prepared.

Kakashi sat back on his heels, frowning at his handful of shredded cards. It startled him that he'd even thought there would be a next time, especially considering this was the first instance Naruto had spent more than five minutes in his apartment. However, what really boggled him was the tentative hope that the youth would come back. He shook himself out of his reverie, continuing to clean the mess. If he was feeling more like his usual self he wouldn't be thinking like that. He'd feel better in the morning, and then everything would be back to the way it had always been.

"Hey, I thought I was supposed to help you clean up," Naruto said with disappointment as he stepped out of the washroom and set the awkwardly folded borrowed clothes on the bed.

"You took too long," Kakashi shrugged, walking to the rubbish bin.

"You're still going to teach me the ANBU code when you get back, aren't you?" He asked, picking up the teacup, empty rice cracker bag, remaining cards and book of haiku.

"I told you I would," the Jounin said as he reached out for the cup and bag.

"Promise?"

Kakashi's hands halted a few inches from retrieving the items, that eerie feeling coming back as Naruto's gaze went straight through him. It abruptly occurred to him why he considered the expression 'eerie'. He wasn't looking into the eyes of a child, no matter how childishly they could shine. They were the eyes of a half-grown man watching him with the shadow of understanding and defiance lurking in the depths, demanding he make an unreasonable agreement.

Promise me you'll come back.

Kakashi let out a heavy sigh, shoulders slumping in defeat. "Yeah...I promise," he lied as he took the teacup and empty bag, waving his hand for Naruto to pocket the cards. "Of course, it's not like you'll actually have the book memorized by then..." he smirked over his shoulder, tossing the bag into the rubbish bin and putting the cup on the shelf next to the range.

"Ha! Don't underestimate me," Naruto sniffed, rubbing his nose arrogantly after pocketing the cards and stuffing the book down the front of his jacket. "I'll even have that card trick down pat. See you in a month, Kakashi-sensei!" He waved, ducking out the door.

Kakashi stretched out his senses, feeling the swiftly retreating chakra dashing through the rain toward the other side of the village. He took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose as he closed his eye. The whole apartment smelled like him now. He shook his head and bundled the pile of borrowed clothes into his hamper. The Jounin stepped up to his bookshelf and scanned the titles till he found the one he was after. Plucking it off the shelf, he flopped onto his bed and started reading.

The continuing rain didn't distract him. The gloom didn't sneak in and cloud his focus. The weather outside didn't even exist anymore. He fell asleep halfway through the book, breathing in the familiar scent that always reminded him of windswept grass and sunlight.

He awoke at dawn panting and covered in sweat, his body shivering from the aftermath of a dream. His stomach churned as his mind whirled in horrified denial, and he scratched and fumbled at his window to slide it forcefully open. He put his head in his hands and pulled harshly on his hair. His breathing calmed after a little while and a slight breeze cooled the shirt clinging to his damp skin. He looked at his hands, a few silver threads draped loosely over the trembling fingers. Act like nothing happened.

Easier said than done.

He wasted no time leaving for his mission, only just barely remembering to stuff what little perishable food he had into his backpack. A few days passed without a repeat of that night, and he managed to follow his only lead to a seedy little town that reeked of corruption and dark secrets. The bartender's information was expensive, but well worth it for gaining the

trust of a highly knowledgeable contact. The contact's price was much higher, unfortunately, and as he sat there trying not to show any fear he wondered if he would make it out of the place in one piece.

His muscles tensed and screamed at him to get the hell out of there as the woman approached, her golden hair loose and sweeping around her scantily-clad body. Desperately needed information was whispered in his ear as the lithe blonde slid her hand across his thigh to tuck a minuscule piece of paper under the white wrappings that held his kunai holster. His hands shook slightly as he played his part for anyone who might be watching, letting his fingers slip through the wispy gold strands framing her face and trying not to relish the soft texture.

She left him a hollow shell of a man with hands that threatened to stray too far from the path of decency. Her pale blue eyes were clever and understanding, and she even went so far as to genuinely offer to bed him that night. He told her to wait for an hour after the moon rose, but no longer. He watched the moon rise from the edge of a cliff several miles away, then continued on his mission without looking back. Act like nothing happened.

Easier said than done.

The dream came back. Act like nothing happened.

Easier said than done.

Promise?

Kakashi walked slowly down a game trail through a thick forest, his footsteps deliberate and plodding like a weary beast of burden hauling a cart. The analogy floated through his muzzy thoughts for a minute before he finally registered it and coughed out a weak laugh. His focus on the path in front of him was momentarily broken and he tripped on an upturned root. Nothing in his body would respond properly, and he fell hard onto his side before he could catch himself.

The ground was delightfully cool through the thin fabric of his masked cheek, and he lay there for a few moments while he gasped for air. He couldn't breathe. He just couldn't breathe with his vest suffocating his boiling skin. Grunting, he rolled onto his back to unzip the uncomfortable green vest, and shivered violently as a strong breeze skated across the sweat-soaked shirt that was now exposed. He didn't have the energy to close the vest against the cruel wind, and after a few minutes of grimacing torture the chills eased.

A brief sensation of clarity came to his mind as he panted on the ground. Fumbling in one of the pockets of his vest, he pulled out a small bottle and looked at the contents. The two yellow pills rattled softly against the glass as his hand trembled. Only two left... How long had it been since he took the last one? How many hours? How many days? Weeks? Months? Years? What day was it, anyway? And where the hell was he?

He closed his eye and rested his wrist against his forehead protector, all that thinking giving him a stabbing headache. Maybe it had been long enough. Maybe he should take another pill. They had to last him till he made it across the border and found help. He felt himself begin to drift away, the coolness of the ground seeping through his clothing and urging him to relax. Just stay for a little while. Just lie still. Just keep your eyes closed and sleep. You'll feel better when you wake up. Just lie still.

"Three hours."

The voice startled Kakashi into opening his eye, his muscles flinching painfully at the surprise. A tinkle of glass hitting the ground drew his gaze to the side, and he stared open-mouthed at the person sitting next to him.

"Wha?" Kakashi croaked, his voice rough and his throat dry.

"It's been three hours since you took the last pill, Kakashi-sensei," Naruto said, looking down with fearful concern.

The Jounin pushed himself to his side, propping himself onto his elbow. This couldn't be happening.

"You have to hold out for as long as you can before you take another dose," Naruto continued firmly.

"Where am I?" He asked, looking up at what had to be an illusion.

"I don't know," Naruto replied sadly. "But you're not home yet, and that's where you need to be. You have to get up and keep walking."

"How do I know I can trust you?" Kakashi narrowed his eye, wishing the poison hadn't stolen every last ounce of his power.

"Get up, Kakashi-sensei. Get up and keep walking."

"Who are you?!" The idea of a genjutsu encouraging him to press forward was ridiculous, and without his ability to mold chakra he couldn't dispel it even if he tried.

"Promise me you'll get up and keep walking. Promise me you'll come home," Naruto said softly, his expression begging the Jounin to obey.

Kakashi groaned in defeat, dropping his head and picking up the fallen bottle of pills. Even as a hallucination, that damn kid had eyes that could break him. "Fine, fine, I got it," he grumbled, pushing himself to unsteady feet.

"Promise?" Naruto's voice asked from behind him.

"Yeah, I promise..." he sighed, clumsily stuffing the bottle back into his open vest and forcing his aching burning body to start walking.

The world eventually became a blur of brown and green, slowly getting darker the further he walked. It felt like his mind was doing the same thing, and he scrabbled and clung to his fading sense of direction. He was dimly aware of stumbling over things that stuck out of the ground, sometimes falling and having to pick himself up. Other times he didn't reach the ground, his shoulder banging against a tree long enough for him to weakly claw at the bark and get his feet back under him. But he had to keep walking. He had to keep going till the darkness swallowed him up.

Something tapped against his temple with an irritating slow rhythm. It hurt. He wished it would stop so he could go back to sleep.

"Hey, Kakashi-sensei, you shouldn't sleep here like that, you know?"

Kakashi groaned, keeping his eyes closed and trying to sink back into unconsciousness. ...not him...god, save me...

"You're gonna get bugs in your hair." There was a pause as the young teenage Naruto waited for a response. "Hey, Kakashi-sensei, are you dead? If you're dead, can I take your mask off?"

"No..." he croaked, the word barely audible from the dryness of his throat.

"Stingy..." Naruto grumbled petulantly. "You don't sound good, Kakashi-sensei, you should probably get up now or you're gonna get sick. And you're gonna get bugs in your hair."

"Go away..." The ground was so wonderfully cool against his blistering chest.

"Hey, Kakashi-sensei, you know what? Know what? There's a spring over here, you can get a drink if you want. I'll show you where it is, it's right over there. Aren't you thirsty Kakashi-sensei?"

"...make it stop..." Kakashi almost sobbed, cracking his eye open to look up at the short punk in the bright orange outfit squatting next to him. ...really? Even in his hallucinations Naruto was trying to trick him into showing his face?

"What are you talking about? Make what stop?" Naruto screwed his face up and craned his neck forward to squint at the Jounin's face with intense scrutiny. "Did you hit your head, or something?"

"You know...for a cute kid, you can make the ugliest faces."

"Huh?" He blinked, blue eyes wide with innocent confusion.

"So cute..."

"Mmmm...Kakashi-sensei, you know you're not making any sense!" Naruto grumbled, lacing his hands behind his head and sitting back on his heels as he made a sour expression.

"And so ugly..." Kakashi rasped a chuckle, dragging one trembling arm up to push himself onto his side so he could at least gasp for air a little more comfortably.

Naruto stuck his tongue out, then peered down at the silver-haired man with concern. "Hey, Kakashi-sensei, are you sick?"

"Yeah."

"Then you really should drink some water, you know. Come on, it's right over there, I'll show you," he said brightly, jumping to his feet and trotting off a few paces. "Here, see?

Kakashi sighed and lolled his head back so he could see where the young Naruto was. The first thing he saw was his own forehead protector in the boy's grasp, and as he refocused his eye just beyond the object he could see flashes of water in the dim pre-dawn light. Every cell in his body screamed in joy, the very thought of drinking water giving him a small boost of energy. Wanting or needing something, and being able to actually get to it were two different things, however.

"That's real...?" He asked, not daring to believe it.

"Of course it's real, why wouldn't it be? Man, you know you're acting weird..."

"I'm sick, remember?" Kakashi said, gritting his teeth and trying to get his legs to move. "Hey, Naruto, can you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Go stand guard," he grunted, pressing his face into the ground and pushing his arms to get under his chest.

"Eehhh?!" Naruto protested loudly.

"I don't know...where I am," Kakashi panted, taking a break from the effort of just propping himself on his elbows. "You'll watch my back, won't you?"

The ugly little clenched face relaxed into wide-eyed astonished delight, his cheeks turning pink as he blushed. "Sure!" Naruto saluted, leaping forward and taking up a post on top of an old fallen tree trunk at Kakashi's back.

"Thank you." ...so cute, damn it...

Having caught his breath as much as he could in his condition, he turned his attention back to the water pouring from the rocky outcrop a mere 15 feet away. It took him a few minutes to literally drag his unresponsive body to the bubbling spring. All he could think of was drowning his face in the cool water, and drinking till he burst.

"Don't."

Kakashi paused, startled at the force behind that young voice.

"Kakashi-sensei, you shouldn't drink too fast or you'll get a tummy ache, you know," Naruto's voice said brightly.

"Heh, that's right, isn't it..." he smiled gently, sliding his mask down and filling his mouth with water...but no more than that yet.

"Yep!"

"Tell me if you see anyone, okay, Naruto?" He said, letting the water cascade over his throbbing head and waiting till his first drink cooled his burning stomach.

"You can count on me, Kakashi-sensei!"

"I know."

Dawn came and went. Kakashi forced himself to drink slowly and steadily, one mouthful at a time. He paced himself to the rhythm of Naruto's heels tapping against the log the boy was sitting on, not letting himself gulp more when he desperately wanted to. Dipping his head under the water and letting it cascade down his back and chest helped distract his thirst and cool his burning skin. Soon he could practically feel all the cells in his body start to absorb the moisture like tiny sponges, and he continued his regiment.

Sunlight began to filter into the tree-filled glade. The frantic thirst lost its edge, and he kept on drinking. The thirst vanished completely, and he continued forcing the one mouthful of water down every few minutes. The sun was high in the sky by the time he felt he might possibly be somewhat hydrated. The stone was cool against his back, and he pulled his mask up before letting his arm flop to the ground. Idly, he wondered if he could sleep here for a few hours.

A very loud sigh from an obviously bored thirteen year-old dashed those hopes, and he chuckled in spite of his aching disappointment. He figured it wouldn't be long before Naruto would start pestering him. He closed his eye, determined to take the opportunity to rest while he had the chance. An almost imperceptible giggle and the bright scent of sunshine roused him from his doze. Cracking his eye open, he saw a hazy image of something in front of his face and jerked away reflexively.

Blinking in the afternoon light, he glared at the young blonde crouching in front of him with his hand again reaching out toward Kakashi's mask. His arms wouldn't move properly yet, the muscles slow to respond as he tried to bat away the little hand. Naruto snickered impishly, easily ducking out of the way and reaching forward again. This time Kakashi managed to awaken his legs and push himself to his feet using the rock outcrop behind him for support. The world rocked and spun beneath him, and he clutched at the stone till the feeling passed. He had to stay out of range of those small persistent hands.

"What are you doing?!" Kakashi demanded, scowling at the impudent brat.

"Hee!" Naruto laced his fingers behind his head with a grin of triumph, Kakashi's forehead protector still in his grasp. "I got Kakashi-sensei to stand up!"

"You devious little shit..."

Naruto just laughed wickedly, dancing back and jumping onto the log he'd been sitting on earlier. "You know you gotta get moving, Kakashi-sensei. You gotta start walking, or you're never gonna make it back to Konoha."

"I got it, I got it," Kakashi sighed, lurching forward and taking a few unsteady steps toward the boy. "I need that back," he said, pointing at the forehead protector.

"Eh? Oh, right!" Naruto nodded with a smile and held out the cloth and metal object. "You're gonna make it back to Konoha, right Kakashi-sensei?"

"Yeah, I will," Kakashi said, stretching out his hand and wondering how he was supposed to take something from a hallucination.

"Promise?"

"I promise," he said, fingers clasping over the solid metal strip as the beaming Naruto vanished.

He stood there for a moment, lifting the forehead protector off the outstretched branch it had been hanging on. The cloth on one side was torn, and he could see a few strands of silver hair caught on the end of the broken branch. Tying the band around his head, he let his fingers brush against the scratch at his temple. It throbbed somewhere beneath the pounding of his head. He felt his knee buckle, and he stumbled forward against the log. He couldn't let himself get distracted, he had to start moving.

One foot down. Head North. Next foot. Again. Again. Again. Don't stop. Don't look back. Don't go that way. Don't think. Walk. Again. Still North? Again. The heat was becoming

unbearable, his head splitting open and blinding him with sharp flashes of light in the dim surroundings. He'd reached his limit, he had to take another pill or he would go mad. His hands shook dangerously as he somehow managed to pull out the bottle from his pocket with numb fingers.

Only two left. How much farther to the border?! Did he already make it across?! How much farther to finding help?! His lungs hurt from gasping for air, and he tried to swallow to ease his dry throat as he pulled his mask down. Letting his legs collapse beneath him, he clutched the bottle in both hands so he wouldn't drop it. Once he'd forced his limbs to arrange themselves properly into a semi-balanced sitting position, he used his knee as a stabilizer and opened the bottle.

A vicious chill shook him, and he doubled over. Just one. You can do this. Ignoring the tremors in his body, he reached a finger into the bottle and captured a yellow pill. Popping it into his mouth, he bit down on the vile bitter thing. He quickly put the lid back on the small bottle and then stuffed it in the pocket of his vest, willing himself not to vomit. Not that he had anything in his stomach anyway, but heaving up nothing was a painful experience that he didn't want to go through. The taste only lasted a moment, thankfully, the medicine dissolving quickly along with his consciousness.

"Kakashi-sensei, wake up!"

...let me sleep...

"Wake up, now!"

...don't want to...

"You're going to regret not listening to me, damn it! Wake up!"

...go away...

"**WAKE UP!"**

Kakashi's head exploded at the voice screaming in his ear, the pain making his back arch as every muscle in his body tensed. "Holy hell!" He gurgled, desperately clasping at his skull to keep his brains from spilling out. "I'll kill you..." he gasped, curling up onto his side and cradling his pounding head. "I'll fucking kill you...!"

"Try it," Naruto laughed derisively, his voice somewhere above and to the left. "Just try it, I dare you!"

"Don't...even...tempt me..." Kakashi snarled, panting as he struggled to uncurl himself and get to his knees. His balance wobbled ominously, and he sank his fingers into the dirt to steady himself.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Naruto needled persistently. "You said you were going to kill me, right? Get your ass up, or you'll never get the chance. Not that you actually have a chance in hell."

"Shut...up...!" Kakashi moaned painfully, resting his forehead against the ground and wishing it would simply open up and swallow him. Even his bones were on fire, the flesh melting away under his blackened and crispy skin. How was it possible for a person to be this hot and still be alive?!

"Make me! Get up and make me! Get up and walk! I'll take you on any day and curb-stomp the shit out of you for even thinking you could lay a finger on me, you withered up old mongrel!"

"So...dead...!" Kakashi growled, using his rage to force unwilling limbs into action. The world tilted on its axis when he got to his feet, but he endured it and held firm till things went back to the way they were supposed to be.

"Now walk!" Naruto ordered furiously. "You think you're going to make it back to Konoha by standing there like a dumbass, waiting for crows to come shit on your head?!"

"Oh...I'll make it back...don't you god damn worry about that," Kakashi hissed, glaring venomously at the angry figure standing in front of him.

"Promise?" Naruto asked, narrowing his eyes and tilting his head arrogantly.

"I promise, you son of a bitch," he grinned maliciously, lurching forward to start walking.

Naruto snorted in satisfaction, tilting a cocky grin and vanishing as he turned to walk down the left fork of the overgrown path. A gentle breeze picked up as Kakashi stepped through the spot where Naruto had just been standing. The wind drifted from his back, cooling his sweat-dampened clothes just enough to make his fever bearable. It was a steady push of fresh air, urging him forward despite his intense desire to collapse on the ground and sleep.

"Damn it...stop trying to help me...I still want to hate you right now..." Kakashi mumbled at the wind, perfectly aware that he was imagining the scent of sunshine when his eye could clearly see the moon in the sky.

The time and distance dragged by in a steadily mounting haze of fevered pain until he was too far gone to try to think, much less pay attention to his surroundings. It was all he could do to keep forcing one foot in front of the other. He didn't know where he was and he couldn't even muster up the brainpower to figure out which way North was after the moon disappeared behind the clouds. The only logic behind the direction he was walking in was the fact that the wind was pushing his back, and he let it guide him.

At least there was some small consolation that he was sure he was vaguely walking in one direction, instead of wandering in circles deliriously. One foot. The next. Again. Again. He was dimly aware of the world becoming brighter as dawn approached. He ignored it and focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Again. Again. Again...

Last pill. Last pill. Where was he?! Why was it dark? Why was it so dark and he was so hot? That wasn't right. Something about a pill..last pill. There was a pill that would stop the pain...stop the burning...stop everything...make it stop... Where was it? Where was he? No, wait. Pocket, he had a pocket somewhere. Somewhere...on something green. A vest? Pocket.

No pocket...no vest...no shirt...what happened? Oh, right, too hot. Somewhere. Somewhere...there! Vest. Pocket. Pill! ...

Kakashi drifted toward consciousness, idly aware of someone calling his name. He considered answering, but couldn't find the motivation to do so. The dark was so nice, he wanted to stay there. The voice persisted, soft and distant. He wanted to ignore it, but there was something about it that caught his fading attention.

The vicious cycle began. He didn't know why it had caught his attention, which in itself was catching his attention because he wanted to know why he didn't know why. Reality fragmented and fell around him like a broken window, the pieces slowly putting themselves back together so he could look out of the glass.

"...sensei..." a woman's voice whispered in his ear.

FUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!

His eye snapped open in a dead panic, his heart pounding painfully as his chest heaved and he desperately gulped in air as if he had somehow stopped breathing for too long. The world was a foggy mass of dim color and swaying shadows. He couldn't be sure, but he suspected he was laying on his side. His head was threatening to crack open like an egg, and he was certain there wasn't a scrap of flesh left on his ash-covered bones. But this wasn't what was bad about the situation, this was nothing! Where was she?! He had to get out of there, now!

"Are you awake, Kakashi-sensei...?"

Shit, she was behind him! He coughed and gurgled something unintelligible, frantically willing his body to move. His fingers twitched.

"Oh, something moved, didn't it," she hummed. "Let me see it..."

He had to calm down, he had to focus. This was all an illusion. It wasn't real! He felt something slide across the ANBU tattoo on his arm, and he glanced over to meet a pair of luminous blue eyes. She flicked her tongue off his skin and licked her lips sensuously.

"You taste nice..." she purred.

Are you fucking kidding me?!

"G-get away!" The Jounin choked, flinching his shoulder and somehow getting his hand to move a bit. There was nothing left of him, all the muscle had been melted away in the ungodly fire consuming his flesh.

"Mmm...don't want to..." she said slyly, leaning over and letting her long, loose blonde hair fall across his bare arms and waist.

"No!" Kakashi snarled, lifting his trembling arm to weakly try to push her back. Her fingers wrapped delicately around his wrist, holding it there with a gentle but firm grasp *that he could feel!* He looked up at her in unguarded horror. "What...?!" She kissed her way down his forearm, brushing her teeth against his elbow where it was bent. "Stop!" He practically

sobbed, an overwhelming amount of self disgust making him want to vomit. There was no physical way his body would respond to her urgings in his condition; a fact he was beyond thankful for. This bitch was flat out mind-fucking him!

"As long as you stay here, I'll never let you go, Kakashi-sensei..." she said hungrily, her free hand reaching out to stroke his cheek.

"...as long as..."

"Mm-hmm...as long as you stay..." she said softly, looking at him from beneath long lashes.

Kakashi clenched his teeth, letting his rage burn and replace the muscles that had been eaten away by fever. He pulled his arm free from her grasp and screamed in pain as he willed his limbs to respond. Why did everything hurt so much?!

"Why are you fighting it...?" She asked from just behind him as he forced himself to his knees.

"Because I don't want this," he panted, his head feeling light and numb as he sat back on his heels and stared wide-eyed at a swirling mass of shapes and shadows. His arms dangled limply at his sides. Was he under water?

"Liar..." she whispered, flicking her tongue against the edge of his ear and sliding her fingers over his shoulder.

He gave a startled shout, flinching violently away from the contact and ending up sprawled on his back because his arms buckled under him as he tried to catch himself. It felt like he couldn't remember how to move properly. Nothing was doing what he wanted it to do. Not good. He was back where he started. The woman crawled toward him like a cat, and it took all his strength and focus to push himself to his elbows. Her naked body glistened in the dark and her long hair dragged on the ground, unheeded in the face of that burning desire in her eyes. He had to get away!

"It's okay, I'll make you feel better..." she purred, her hands padding across the ground as she stalked him.

"Stop!" His heels dug into the dirt after a struggle to remember how to get them to move in the first place, pushing him backward till his back hit something solid. "I don't want you!"

Her hair brushed against his leg as she caught up to him, and she paused. "No?" She asked enticingly, tilting her head to the side and starting to lean forward again. Her image brightened and then abruptly changed. "Then who do you want, Kakashi-sensei...?" Naruto asked quietly, the hungry expression in his blue eyes just as intense as the woman's had been.

WHAT?!

THE?!

FUCK?!

His mind broke as he watched the shirtless young man approach him till his face was inches from Kakashi's chest. NOT! HAPPENING! Gritting his teeth, he forced his arms to lift sluggishly from his sides to try to push the blonde away. Naruto caught both his wrists half way there, gripping them with gentle force. Kakashi's shock made him hesitate a second too long, and suddenly Naruto's tongue was sliding along his neck.

A moment of perfect clarity slammed into the Jounin's fever-clouded mind at the complete impossibility of the situation. Wait, this really wasn't happening. He suddenly felt every muscle in his body claw at his skin and bones. He could move! Choking out a curse, he closed his eye and scrambled away from the hallucination. He felt cool fingertips trail across his back as he escaped, and he ignored them. He could move! He could stand!

The ground tilted sharply, buckling his knees and sending him crashing down. No, he could stand...he had to stand up! The world spun around him, and he could feel his body sinking into the earth as if it were quicksand. It would be so easy to just let himself sink...to escape this nightmarish world of agony... A skating brush of teeth on the back of his neck sparked renewed determination and he could feel his lips pulling back in a furious snarl. Hunching his shoulders like a cornered wolf, he pushed himself to his feet and stayed there.

"Don't stop walking," Naruto whispered, his breath tickling the back of Kakashi's ear.

"I won't..." Kakashi rasped, his chest heaving with labored breath as he stood there and glared at the hazy shadows in front of him.

"...promise?" Naruto's voice was soft and thick with desire, his arms snaking over the Jounin's shoulders and resting against the bare chest.

"I promise," he replied, reaching up and grabbing the vines that rested against his torso. "I have to make it back...so I can kill you..." he hissed, the vines snapping in his grip.

A breeze sent a chill up his spine as it pushed against his bare back, an unrepentant laugh echoing through the trees. He gave the wind the finger while he took a slow painful step forward. Something bumped against the back of his leg, and he almost lost his tenuous grip on his balance as he looked down in surprise. Blinking to focus his eye properly, he stared at the familiar green object caught on the small supply pouch at his belt. The trees laughed again, and he pulled the vest over his shoulders as he trudged forward.

One foot in front of the other. Again. Again. Ignore the heat. Ignore the pain. Keep breathing. Keep walking. Pick yourself up. Don't stop. Don't stop. One foot. The next. Again. Don't close your eye. Don't escape the light. Get back up. Keep walking. Let the wind push you. Next foot. Again. Again. Get up. Again. Again. Again. Don't let the darkness stop you. Keep moving. Don't let your knees buckle. Don't fall. Don't fall! Stop falling!

"Kakashi-sensei!"

There was a terrified, almost hysterical edge to that voice. He wanted to look up, but couldn't find the strength to lift his chin as he was dimly aware of his knees slamming into the hard ground. The Jounin felt his chest hit something, and vaguely wondered why it didn't feel like his face had hit the dirt as well. He blinked, trying to process the information.

Whatever was under his chin was solid, and something wrapped around his back to keep him steady. He honestly didn't care what he'd fallen against as long as he didn't fall any further. This was nice. His eyelid slowly dropped. He could rest like this. Not down, not up, just hovering somewhere in between. He could stay like this forever. He would get back up in a minute, though, he simply wanted to catch his breath.

"Kakashi-sensei hang in there! Stay awake!"

The voice was behind his ear, vibrating through his heaving chest as his lungs valiantly tried to keep filling with air.

"Nng...please stop," Kakashi begged in a rasping whisper, forcing his eye to crack open. "Don't...don't make me...get up yet...please..."

All the breath was abruptly squeezed out of him and there was a blinding flash of light. Pain lanced through his skull and the world tipped upside-down, throwing him into the dark. He shouldn't be there. It was too dark, he wasn't supposed to be there. He should move. Something was wrong. Very wrong. He had to get up! He was going to drown!

Gasping and choking in air, his eye flew open but saw nothing. He arched his back, feeling the resistance of water heavy over his whole body. Where was he?! He had to get up! Something pinned him down, pushing hard on his shoulders and he grasped wildly at it to push it off.

"Kakashi-sensei! Kakashi-sensei listen to me, you have to stop! Stop moving!"

He blinked, his brain trying to make sense of the random patterns of color and movement in front of him. It distracted his panic, and he felt the strength starting to drain from his struggling.

"Hold him still, Naruto, don't let him get up!"

His fingers gripped cloth and he looked up at the sky in confusion. That voice was...who? Who was that? He knew that voice...

"I'm trying! How much longer, Sakura-chan?!"

"Almost done, just hold him," she replied quickly.

The sky blinked, and Kakashi finally managed to focus on a familiar face that was drained of color and filled with fear.

"Kakashi-sensei, you don't have to get up, okay? Lie still, you're safe now!"

"...I am...?" His voice croaked, sounding like metal grating on stone as he stopped his useless fight against a pair of stronger arms.

"Yeah, you are," Naruto nodded, tears of relief spilling down his cheeks as he carefully released his grip on the man's shoulders.

Kakashi stared at Naruto's face for a moment, daring himself to believe what he heard...what he saw...what he could feel under his hand. He could see his vision closing in, the shadows of sleep making the room start to crumble at the edges. No, not yet! There was still something he had to say! His voice wouldn't come out. Damn it! He clenched his teeth and willed his hand to move from the blonde's shoulder to the back of his head. Twining his fingers in the soft blonde hair, he gave a weak jerk of his arm so Naruto's forehead was pressed against his own.

"Naruto..." Kakashi said quietly, looking straight into the wide blue eyes. ***"I am going to kick your fucking ass...! I promise!"***

"...what...?"

The world blissfully sank into darkness as Naruto's voice faded into the distance, and Kakashi knew he had a satisfied smile on his face.

Crazy Going Slowly Am I

Chapter Notes

I pulled a Tarantino here, so this actually starts the day Kakashi leaves for his mission in Book I.

Haiku (c) Basho Matsuo and Yosa Buson

Crazy Going Slowly Am I

Naruto stared at the ceiling in the early morning light, drumming his fingers on the book of haiku lying on his chest. He grumbled a sigh and rolled onto his side, feeling restless and unable to stop thinking about yesterday. Too many things had happened in Kakashi's apartment. The memories were tumbling and rolling around in his head, each one demanding attention. Scowling at the wall, he jumped to his feet and decided that action simply needed to be taken before he went stir crazy. He started forming plans as he quickly got dressed in his casual clothes.

The first plan would involve Hinata's help, and he was glad he had the excuse of going to the Hyuuga Clan's residence to retrieve his umbrella. They had become closer friends over the past few years, but he still felt weird whenever he had to go to the large household to find her. He always had the most unnerving sensation that he might not be allowed to leave once he stepped through the door. His trepidation was irrational, and it confused him. Some day he would figure out why the welcoming smiles of whoever greeted him made him so nervous...

Thankfully, he was able to get in and out of the Hyuuga compound unscathed, pulling Hinata along behind him and describing his plan once they were in the open streets. She agreed readily and told him where to wait for her before dashing off. It occurred to him, after he arrived at the designated location, that this whole thing might just be too humiliating for him to bear. He sat down heavily in the small glade, glaring uncomfortably at the plethora of yellow flowers crowding him.

Naruto whimpered softly, leaning his forehead against the umbrella handle and wondering if Kiba and Shino had gotten to Hinata before him. He was going to smell like those damn flowers when he left. It didn't help that he knew he practically *looked* like them with his bright blonde hair. His head snapped up at a familiar gleeful war cry coming from the trees ahead of him. He took a deep breath, immediately sneezed from the pollen, and stood up with resolute determination. He just wished he didn't feel like such an idiot standing in a field of flowers.

Kiba was the first to burst out of the trees, clinging to Akamaru's back as they both looked at the others chasing behind them. Their eyes were on Naruto in a flash, however, wide with surprise as Akamaru skidded to a halt on one side and Kiba leapt to the other in a crouch. There was a moment of silence as the blonde looked back at them, startled at how his obvious presence had taken them completely off guard. Hinata arrived a second later with Shino trailing behind her, his posture rigid with tension.

"Oi, what's going on?" Kiba glowered, straightening up but not relaxing. Akamaru dipped his head and pinned his ears back warily.

"Ah, sorry," Hinata said, taking a step forward and lacing her fingers behind her back. Her sweet smile was apologetic and pleading. "Naruto-kun wanted to talk to you, and I knew you were both still angry at him. So..." she spread her hands at the field.

"So, you tricked us," Shino said quietly, his expression hidden behind the high collar of his dark under-jacket.

"It was my idea," Naruto said firmly, cutting his hand through the air. He wasn't going to let Shino or Kiba blame Hinata for this if he could help it.

"And your point is...?" Kiba asked, tilting his head suspiciously as his eyes narrowed.

"My point is-" Naruto cut himself off, glancing away and cooling his temper. He didn't want to snap back, that wasn't why he was here. "My point is I wanted to apologize. You were right," he sighed, looking back at Shino and Kiba as the two exchanged a look he couldn't interpret. "I was wrong, okay? I shouldn't have—hnng!"

He was interrupted by the force of a shoulder slamming into him just below his collar bone, the movement coming so swiftly it was just a blur of brown and black. He could hear Akamaru's deep rumbling growl fading into the distance above Hinata's shouting demands that the dog let go of her as the ground knocked the wind out of him. Gasping in air was nearly impossible with the weight of a knee on his chest, and he was hideously aware of tiny legs creeping across his hands and throat. Sunlight reflected off the sharp point of a kunai held centimeters from his eye as he blinked up at Kiba.

"What you shouldn't have done was come here," Kiba snarled, his eyes glinting dangerously. "Who are you?"

"Huh?!" Naruto balked at the raw bloodlust cascading off his friend. Holy shit, he was serious! "What the hell are you talking about?! Can't you tell it's me by my..." his voice trailed off as the breeze swayed the yellow flowers into his line of sight. "...scent... Shinooo!" He called, glaring up at Kiba. "I swear, if your bugs don't recognize my chakra I'll nut-shot you both with a rasengan!"

"That certainly sounds more like what he'd say," Shino said thoughtfully, walking up to the pair with one hand held out a bit from his side to guide the cloud of insects twining around his arm. "It may be somewhat difficult to believe, but I suspect this actually is Naruto." He crouched down next to Naruto's head, flicking his fingers to call his insects off the blonde.

"No way! Is he sick?" Kiba asked with genuine concern, retracting his kunai and sitting back on his heels to take his knee off Naruto's chest.

"I'm not sure..." Shino replied, sliding his fingers over Naruto's forehead to check his temperature.

"GET OFF OF ME!" Naruto shouted furiously, shoving the two assailants back as he sat up. "I am not an imposter! I am not sick! And I am never going to apologize to you two psychos again!" He railed, jumping to his feet and brandishing his umbrella like a sword. He could feel his cheeks burning with indignation.

"What the hell, man?!" Kiba protested, sitting up and raising his arms to illustrate his displeasure at the treatment.

"That is *my* line, damn it!" Naruto whirled, pointing the umbrella at Kiba.

"Our reaction wasn't unreasonable," Shino said calmly as he stood up and put his hands in his pockets. Naruto shot the Aburame youth a hostile look over his shoulder. "That's because your actions and words were completely out of character from the Naruto that we are accustomed to. Even given the argument after the previous assignment, it was inconceivable that y-"

"Aaaagghh! Okay, I get it, I get it!" Naruto wailed, dropping the umbrella and covering his ears against the brutal assault of monotonous words he only half comprehended. Not for the first time he genuinely wondered if Shino had a kekkei genkai for Debilitating Talk Jutsu. "I am *trying* here, all right?!" He said, flailing his arms as Kiba got up and stood next to Shino. "I'm stupid, and I'm reckless, and I don't want to see anyone get hurt, and I don't want to hold you guys back. I won't stand in front of you."

The moment the words left him he felt a mixture of resolve and ire straighten his shoulders. "One of these days all I'm going to be able to do is stand at the window and watch you walk away. Which means," he said, grabbing the fronts of their jackets roughly. "You assholes had better be strong enough to come back to me."

The startled looks on their faces was a peculiar expression Naruto had been getting a lot lately. He wasn't aware of doing anything significantly different, and Kakashi had given him that same look twice the other day. It confounded him a bit. Kiba recovered swiftly, though, his lips curving into a leer that flashed his teeth with wicked amusement.

"Ooh, kinky..."

Naruto let go of Shino and punched Kiba in the face, sending the Inuzaka youth flying to the ground with a pained grunt.

"Oi, I thought you said you didn't want to see anyone get hurt," Kiba snickered, rubbing his nose as he sat up.

"By anyone else," Naruto snapped heatedly, snatching up his umbrella and pointing it right between Kiba's eyes. "No one gets to beat the shit out of you except *me!* And that goes for

you, too!" He said, whirling the umbrella-sword on Shino.

"I have no intention of letting *anyone* do any such thing," Shino replied with a slight scowl of resentment.

"Good, we have an agreement," Naruto huffed angrily, swinging the umbrella onto his shoulder and stalking off.

Akamaru came bounding out of the trees with Hinata close on his heels. The big white beast nearly bowled him over, snuffling excitedly and grinding the top of his head into Naruto's chest. Naruto spat out a curse and swung the umbrella down to try to rap Akamaru on the head. The dog darted out of the way with a playful bark, and trotted over to join Kiba. Naruto plucked at his shirt in disgust. Now he smelled like flowers and dog.

Hinata glanced between all three young men. "Thank goodness you worked everything out," she sighed in relief, loosely wrapping the fingers of her left hand around her right forearm. "I wish you three wouldn't fight like this."

"It's his fault," Kiba shrugged, climbing onto Akamaru's back and resting his elbows on the dog's large head.

"Kiba-kun!" Hinata scolded, though there wasn't much force behind her gentle voice.

"If we're going to be perfectly honest about the entire situation," Shino said, glancing at Kiba. "You were being unnecessarily reckless at the time."

"Hey!" Kiba protested, whirling on Shino.

"Well, whatever, it doesn't really matter anymore," Naruto said, brushing the dog hair off his shirt as the sunshine washed the last of his tension away. "Thanks again, Hinata. Run those two into the ground for me." He tossed her a grin as he propped his umbrella over his shoulder again.

"I'll try," she laughed.

"What, you're not going to stay and play Tag with us?" Kiba asked, sounding disappointed.

"Nah, I've got some other things I need to take care of. I'll catch you guys later!" Naruto called, raising his hand and jogging back toward the village proper.

With that one heavy weight lifted off his shoulders, he felt reinvigorated and ready to face his next intimidating task. He stopped in front of the tall building, fists clenched at his sides as he took a deep breath and steeled his will. He could do this. He refused to believe his steps were hesitant, and he gripped the door handle with slightly trembling fingers. He could do this. Gulping, he threw the door open and walked into the Konoha Library.

The librarian behind the front desk gave a startled gasp at his abrupt entrance, and he quickly scurried behind a bookshelf with a wave of apology. Scratching his scalp, he began scanning the countless titles of books in front of him. The place always tended to creep him out a little, and he just wanted to find the right book and escape the shadowy maze. Crap, he had no idea

how to find what he was looking for. He peeked around the shelf at the dark-haired woman sitting at the desk, wondering if he should ask for help.

"Naruto?" A familiar voice asked in quiet surprise from directly behind him.

The blonde yelped and jumped a foot in the air, spinning around and pressing his back against the shelf. A few books tumbled down around him, and he scrambled to catch them before they hit the floor. He didn't recognize the current librarian, but he was certain that unnamed scary old man was lurking somewhere...just waiting for him to make a mess so he could crack Naruto over the head with his cane.

"Don't sneak up on me like that," Naruto hissed, clutching the books to his chest and glaring at Shikamaru.

He peeped around the shelf quickly, checking to make sure the librarian hadn't seen the near-disaster before swiftly moving to shove the books randomly back onto the shelf. A pained sigh was all the warning he had before the taller Nara youth grabbed his wrist.

"Hey, I was putting them back," Naruto half protested, his status thoroughly demoted to 'holding tray' as Shikamaru began plucking books out of his arms.

"In the wrong places, idiot," he countered. "It'll be troublesome for me if I need to find one of these and they're all scattered around where they shouldn't be."

"Isn't that what the librarian is for?"

"Did you come here just to be a pain in the ass?" Shikamaru asked flatly, replacing the last book.

"No..."

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm looking for a book, why do you think I came in here," Naruto replied wryly.

"What does she want?"

"Huh?"

"What did Tsunade-sama send you here looking for?"

"No one sent me, I came looking for a book myself," Naruto said impatiently. He opened his mouth to give a scathing retort to the wide-eyed disbelief plastered on Shikamaru's face, but it was cut off as he abruptly found his forehead pressed against the taller brunette's. "What are you doing?!" He hissed, ducking away from the hand holding the back of his neck and side-stepping to figure out what the hell was going on.

"You don't seem to have a fever," Shikamaru mused, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes slightly as he watched Naruto.

"Why would I have-"

"Shikamaru, did you find it? Oh, Naruto, what are you doing here?" Ino asked, stepping up to the two young men and waving her hand dismissively to the left. "The medical texts are over there."

"I'm not here for Baa-chan, damn it, I'm just looking for a book," he said angrily, fighting to keep his voice down. He recoiled furiously from the expression of concern on Ino's face, taking a preemptive step back. "What is *wrong* with you peop-"

Ino's hand was over his mouth in an instant as Shikamaru's arm circled his chest to pin Naruto securely against his side. Out of the corner of his wide baffled eyes he could see Ino grab the back of Shikamaru's vest. Then, in a burst of chakra he was surreptitiously hauled off his feet. It was only a split-second till his feet hit the ground again, somewhere behind a bookshelf on the second story. His eye twitched in barely contained rage as he realized he was unable to move a muscle thanks to Shikamaru's Shadow Bind Jutsu. Ino drew her hand back to form a seal in front of his face, and he simply glowered at her through her fingers.

"Mind-transfer Jutsu!"

The world tipped on its side and went grey. In the distance he could hear Kurama snarling a few choice curses, yanking Naruto back to reality as Ino escaped the fox's indignant tongue-lashing.

"It's him," Ino said, shaking her head and staggering back a step.

Naruto stood rigid with fury, gritting his teeth and waiting for Shikamaru to let go of him. As soon as he was released from the strong arm and the Shadow Bind Jutsu, he stomped right past the pair without a glance or a word to either. He walked up to the railing that circled the second story of the library, slapped his hands down on it, and took a deep breath.

"I AM HERE FOR A BOOK!" He shouted, giving all the startled occupants of the room down below a withering look. "NOT FOR ANYONE ELSE, JUST ME! IS THAT OKAY WITH EVERYO-" Hands and arms wrapped around his face and torso, jerking him back into a tangled pile of bodies.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" Ino snapped quietly, sitting half on his legs and leaning close to his face where both her hands were pressed over his mouth. "This is a library, not a stadium!"

Naruto let loose an absolute tirade of trenchant retorts at the top of his lungs, struggling absently against Shikamaru's grip around his waist and chest as he tried to fling out his arms to illustrate the points he was making. Not once did he even care that the only thing either of his friends could hear was unintelligible muffled noise. It took him a few minutes to run out of steam, and he sat there panting and leaning back against Shikamaru's chest.

"Are you done?" Ino asked drolly, raising an eyebrow.

He mumbled something that resembled 'yes', looking sulkily away.

"Good," she said, her expression shifting to distaste as she pulled her hands away and wiped them on Naruto's shirt once Shikamaru's arms were out of the way.

Naruto gave her a flat look of annoyance, but didn't move.

"Oi," Shikamaru prompted, elbowing the blonde in the back and untangling his leg from where it was hooked around Naruto's waist as soon as Ino stood up. "What have you been doing, anyway? You smell like flowers...and dog."

"I don't want to talk about it," Naruto grumbled, untwining himself from Shikamaru's grip and standing up.

"Mmm?" Ino hummed with delighted suspicion, leaning toward Naruto and giving a delicate sniff before straightening back up. "Freesia. It suits you," she said with an amused giggle.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Naruto asked, smoothing out his rumpled shirt.

"Great, now I smell like them too," Shikamaru groaned as he stood up.

"You could use some freesia," Ino said, flicking her finger at Shikamaru's nose. "It means childishness, innocence and trust."

"Hey, weren't you here for a book?" Shikamaru asked, turning to look at Naruto.

"Yeah, something on the old myths behind the ANBU masks."

"Don't try to ignore me," Ino interjected, hooking her arms in both of theirs and pulling them along as she walked.

"Why do you want to know about that?" Shikamaru asked.

"Kakashi-sensei told me a little about it, I just want to read the whole story," Naruto shrugged, letting himself be dragged through the library. "He said they started out as a ward against the shinigami."

"Sounds creepy..." Shikamaru said dubiously.

"I know, right?" Naruto grinned.

"He probably just made it up to scare you," Ino said. "Were you being a pest at the time?"

"Umm..." Naruto tilted his head back, trying not to look guilty.

"That would be a yes," she said dryly, turning down an isle and stopping. "Well, this is where it would be if it's here at all."

"It shouldn't be too hard to find," Shikamaru said, looking at the shelves with searching calculation.

"Sorry to leave you here, but we still have research to complete. Have fun," Ino sang, letting go of Naruto's arm and hauling the protesting Shikamaru off.

"Thanks," he called softly to their retreating forms, then turned to the intimidating shelf of books with a sigh. It would have been nice if they'd stayed to help him, but Ino seemed to be in an awfully big rush to finish whatever they were researching.

An hour passed before he finally found what he was looking for. He sat on the floor, leaning back against the wall of books for a long while as he mulled over the myth. According to the book, the hollow eyes of the mask would collect all the memories of what it had seen. If it was ever broken, then the memories would be released and the shinigami would realize he'd been tricked. Enraged, he would hunt down and punish the one who'd fooled him. He shivered, rubbing his arms and recalling the one time he'd seen a broken ANBU mask. Haku had died rather gruesomely only a few minutes later.

Naruto scrubbed his fingers through his hair and stood up to replace the book. Kakashi had said the legend was just that; a legend. ANBU wore their masks the same way regular shinobi wore their forehead protectors. It was part of the uniform, no superstitions attached. So, why was it bothering him so much? He found himself wondering if Sai still had his mask as he walked down the stairs. A sharp hiss to his right brought him out of his thoughts, and he stepped over to where Ino was waving at him from around a bookshelf.

"So?" She asked, sliding her finger over the titles and plucking a book off the shelf.

"It was definitely creepy," he shrugged.

"Hey, Naruto," Ino said hesitantly, cradling the book to her chest as she looked up at him with concern. "You're not thinking of joining ANBU, are you?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"You shouldn't. You know you're too dumb to pass the written test," she grinned, rapping him on the forehead with her knuckles.

"Ow. I might be able to do it," he grumbled, rubbing his forehead.

"Not as long as Shikamaru's on the exam board," she laughed softly, then gave him a somewhat sad smile. "Besides, freesia aren't supposed to be used for funerals."

Naruto was startled by Ino's expression, and after a short pause he glanced away with a sigh of resignation. He hated to admit it, but deep down he knew she was right about him not belonging in that particular sect of elite shinobi. Right beside that was the grating knowledge that he would never, ever be able to pass an exam written by Shikamaru.

"You are going to be the next Hokage, not the next Hokage's guard. Remember that. Now, shoo, you're in the way," she said, turning him around and giving his back a firm shove toward the door.

"You're the one who called me over, geeze," Naruto scowled, shoving his hands in his pockets and half-stomping out the door.

His semi-pensive mood had been broken by the kunoichi, though, and he walked to Ichiraku with a lighter step. He swiftly bundled his clothes in his hamper as soon as he got home, and a long soak in the bath got rid of the last of the flowery smell. He fell asleep reading haiku, and the next morning he made sure to pack the book into the supply pouch attached to his belt along with a deck of cards. Since his last mission had only lasted a few days, he was back on duty after one day off.

Four days later, he was on his way back to Konoha after a relatively easy assignment. The two Chuunin he was with invited him out to a bar to celebrate their success. Naruto declined with a laugh, still being too young to drink and not having any real desire to indulge in the stuff anyway. The small village was pleasant and boisterous, lanterns and streamers draped everywhere for some kind of local festival. He walked around, just delighting in the atmosphere.

It was the quick movement in the shadows between two buildings that caught his attention and made him stop to look. It was what he saw that had him sprinting away three seconds later with his face on fire. He had the impression that the couple had been slightly drunk, but there was no way of telling if it was because of sake or because of each other. Slapping his cheeks hard, he shook his head and leaned his back against a tree on the outskirts of the village.

His breath was quick, his heart pounded, and his brain felt like it was spinning as fast as a rasengan. It took him a minute to focus his thoughts and cool down his overwhelming embarrassment at seeing such an intimately passionate moment between two people. When he finally regained his composure, he was left with a sense of confusion and agitation. Those eyes. He'd seen those eyes before. Where had he seen them?

He scowled as he searched his memories; his frustration alternating between his inability to erase the image of the expressions on the man and woman's faces, and the fact that he couldn't remember *ever* seeing that kind of thing before. He wasn't a peeper, damn it! He didn't go around looking for that kind of show! Okay, he would admit that he watched couples flirt with a mixture of envy and interest. It was fascinating to glimpse it every once in a while without actually staring, and it was invaluable when it came to thinking up ways to improve his Sexy Jutsu. Still, there was a line he didn't cros-

Naruto felt his heart stop and his knees buckle under him as his brain clicked to a halt over one memory. Those eyes. He remembered that look. The raging fire in the dark that wanted nothing more than to consume him, to devour him till there was nothing left, to quench the endless thirst, to drown in the fierce pleasure that bordered far too close to pain and madness. A cold knot tightened in his stomach, making him double over and gasp for air. What had he done...?! How could he have done that?! That had never happened before! That wasn't supposed to happen! *Holy shit, how could Kakashi have looked at him like that?!*

He clutched his head, drawing his knees up and burying his face in them. It wasn't possible! No one had ever looked at his transformation like that, it wasn't possible! She was a distraction. An annoyance. A bargaining chip. A manipulator. Blackmail. Shock value. Guys

flipped out over her, but it was always superficial. That was the whole point of the illusion! Most of the time Naruto was damn sure even Ero-Sennin had demanded he transform just to aggravate him. So, why had Kakashi...

As his sanity fractured, he idly wondered if he could mimic that passionate look in his Sexy Jutsu. It would be enormously effective, after all. Gurgling out a short scream, he yanked hard on his hair. Stop it! He'd only done that to bait Kakashi into showing his face, that was all! It was just a prank! It didn't even work! He'd jumped away from her touch like he'd been stabbed with hot pokers.

It occurred to Naruto after a second that he should probably be grateful for the Jounin's self-restraint. What if it *had* worked...?! What would he have done if Kakashi had tried to do something? What if he'd tried to kiss her? Again, his mind flickered to an unreasonable line of thinking. If he'd tried to kiss her, then that would mean he would have had to take off his mask. Wasn't that why he'd transformed in the first place?

It wasn't like it would have been the first time he'd kissed a guy. Not that his previous experiences were either pleasant or consensual on both sides of the unintended bashing of lips together. Would he have let Kakashi ki-OH MY GOD, STOP THINKING LIKE THAT! Seeing Kakashi's face was not worth that price!

...

RIGHT?!

Thoroughly rattled, Naruto jumped to his feet. He was practically sparking with the need to do something, anything, to shut his brain off. He briefly entertained the idea of smashing his face against the tree until he knocked himself out, but he honestly wasn't sure he'd be able to do it without destroying the tree. Also, there would be a lot of uncomfortable questions to answer from his teammates when they found him unconscious.

He thought about drinking, but that would again require facing his comrades. Not to mention having to come up with some desperate excuse as to why he'd abruptly turned into a frantic under-age drunk. He contemplated running, but he couldn't abandon his teammates any more than he could face them. Wait...he could still run, he just couldn't run *away*. Virtually sobbing with relief at his brilliant idea, he transformed into a small fox and pelted through the rolling hills surrounding the village.

Every ounce of him was focused on sprinting as fast as he could, bounding over rocks and letting the grass whip him in the face without blinking. He skirted close to the village and to his delight a stray dog began to chase him, giving him further distraction from his treacherous thoughts. Poor dog. It never stood a chance, and Naruto had it hunting him till dawn.

Thankfully his teammates had overindulged, and all three of them trudged back to Konoha looking like death warmed over. They were all too miserable with their individual internal woes to comment on anything but where they were going to stop for lunch. When they reached the village gate that evening, Naruto was feeling slightly better only because he knew he wouldn't have to face Kakashi for another few weeks. A good night's rest after having run

himself ragged both mentally and physically was surprisingly helpful. He was given another mission right away, and that helped as well.

After a few days he came to terms with the incident, secure in the knowledge that Kakashi had wanted *her*, not him. The only drawback to this epiphany was the slight pang of jealousy that refused to remove itself from the back of his mind. He couldn't help thinking it might be nice to have someone look at *him* that way. To be needed so badly that the pain of the desire drove them to the edge of a wild feral madness.

Hinata wouldn't, she was too sweet and caring for that. Besides, he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to see that kind of expression in her eyes; a frenzy of teeth and claws snarling in the darkness. He liked her the way she was, and that kind of total personality switch was a bit disturbing to imagine. Sakura had enough fire in her to let the devil burn her soul, but he didn't even try to picture it. It was only in the last few months that he'd finally settled comfortably into viewing her as just a friend; a sister, almost. She would never look at him that way, and he was satisfied knowing she would turn those eyes to someone else.

Naruto sighed and lay back on his bed, letting his thoughts drift around the two kunoichi. It was too bad the few awkward dates he'd gone on with Hinata had been so...well, awkward. He had known very little about the shy girl, and his unrequited love for Sakura had been a deeply embedded wound that had hampered him from moving too far forward. However, he honestly did like Hinata, and he had wanted to at least get to know more about her.

They had given up on the 'official date' scene quickly, and the next time they simply got together to hang out it was much more comfortable for both of them. Without the pressure of expectations he had grown to enjoy Hinata's company as a friend. Her gentle nature was a pleasant sanctuary from the storm of chaos that always seemed to surround him. It was similar to how he felt when he was with Kakashi.

Lacing his fingers behind his head and lifting one leg for a moment to idly contemplate his toes, he dropped his foot back down with a thump and faced the fact that no one was going to look at him with those carnivorous eyes. It was somewhat disappointing. But maybe he was going about it wrong. Maybe he was the one who was supposed to have that fire. He closed his eyes, wondering what it felt like to be the one needing to devour another until nothing remained of either of them.

The 'wanting another person' part of the equation was there. He'd had enough fantasies about snogging to understand he'd like to actually be able to do it some day. The 'devour' part wasn't working out so well. He could recall the brief flashes of rage-filled bloodlust from when Kurama's old fury used to fuse with his own and send him over the edge. Unfortunately, that particular need to 'devour' wasn't the same as the emotion he was attempting to figure out. He didn't want to literally eat someone...and he was sure that the sentiment was the same for the majority of other people.

Opening his eyes, Naruto scowled at the ceiling. What was it that the couple he'd accidentally spied on and Kakashi had that he didn't? It felt like he had it somewhere hidden inside, almost like a sensation of familiarity without understanding. Instinct, perhaps? He rolled over onto his side and fell asleep wondering if he was better off not wondering about it.

The days passed into weeks and a chill of fear slowly crept into his bones. It had been over a month since Kakashi had left. His impatience and worry defeated his good sense and survival instinct, and Naruto stomped his way into the Hokage's office requesting information. He refused to leave the village or her office without being violently propelled away at the business end of her fist. Two days and a black eye later he started insisting she let him go search for the Jounin. A week passed and he thought to prepare beforehand, going into Sennin Mode before confronting Tsunade.

"Why won't you tell me anything?!" Naruto demanded, planting his palms on the Hokage's desk.

"I *am* telling you something, I'm telling you to get out!" Tsunade snapped, standing up to hurl her stamp at him.

Naruto had to step back a pace to catch it with his hand, the object breaking in his grasp more from the force of her throw than anything. "Let me search for him, it's been too long!" He insisted, shaking out his hand. Even in Sennin Mode that had stung quite a bit.

"OUT!" She roared.

"Tsunade-sama," Shizune burst into the room, easily side-stepping the blonde and holding out a sheet of paper for the Hokage to snatch up in irritation.

"Tell me where he went!" He continued, ignoring the interruption.

"Shizune, poison that brat and lock him up," Tsunade practically snarled, turning her back on the pair to read the paper.

"...eh?!" Shizune jumped back, looking at Naruto and Tsunade as if caught between two warring monsters.

"Baa-chan!" Naruto pleaded furiously.

"Naruto!" Tsunade barked, something in the steel of her tone making him pause. "I'm sending you Southeast, toward the Tea Country peninsula."

"What?! I'm not leavi-"

"Head South, damn you!" The Hokage spun around, tears in her enraged eyes and an edge of desperation to her voice that sent a cold shiver through Naruto's soul. "Find that fool and bring him back alive!"

He stared at her with wide eyes, his entire being momentarily as still as a frozen pond. Heat rushed in from everywhere, swallowing him up in a whirlwind of focused panic as Kurama's chakra flooded his senses. His hands were already forming the seal to create clones before his feet touched the ground outside the village as he re-materialized well beyond the south gate of Konoha. Kurama didn't say anything, allowing his chakra to be drawn without restraint as he watched sharply.

He kicked off into an almost dead sprint, the world quickly becoming a wash of color and raw nerves shrieking in their desire to pick up the slightest hint of Kakashi's presence. Morning turned to night, and he continued to run in the dark without stopping for more than a few minutes' rest every few hours when Biju Mode dropped. Fear gnawed at his empty belly, refusing to allow him to eat. Tsunade's face and words haunted him, and he couldn't stop his mind from circling around the stupid myth about ANBU masks.

He reached the peninsula and turned into the wind to race toward the border. What should have been a three day journey had been cut to less than a day, and he was starting to feel the consequences of pushing himself so hard. The moon seemed to mock him, turning the landscape silver and daring him to continue on till his bones turned to dust. The sudden slap of memories into his head let him know a clone had dispelled, and he skidded to a halt as his knees buckled momentarily.

In an instant he was standing where the clone had been, his brain processing what his senses told him with painful clarity. Kakashi was ahead, his chakra and life force flickering like a candle dying in the wind. Beyond the trees, an hour by normal standards, was a small group of people seething with an intent to kill. They were hunting the Jounin. Bracing himself, Naruto recalled his clones with a snarl and summoned new ones to deal with the enemy.

He stumbled from the weariness of his dispelled clones, letting Kurama's chakra slip away to boost the power of his fresh clones so they could take down the enemy as quickly as possible. So close. So very close. It felt like the few steps he was taking were miles apart from each other as he caught sight of Kakashi collapsing toward the ground. He was dimly aware of shouting something as he ran forward, all his attention drowning in the fear of knowing Kakashi's life was withering away right in front of his eyes.

Sliding on his knees, he caught the masked Jounin's limp form against his chest and reeled in horror at the amount of heat radiating off the man. There was something so unthinkably and abhorrently wrong about Kakashi's skin not being cool to the touch, that he had to fight the urge to scream. His breath came in sharp ragged gasps from where his chin rested on Naruto's shoulder, as if his lungs were being scorched and suffocated by the terrible fever. Naruto steadied his grip around Kakashi's back to keep him from toppling over.

"Kakashi-sensei, hang in there!" Naruto pleaded. "Stay awake!"

"Nng...please stop," Kakashi begged in a rasping whisper. "Don't...don't make me...get up yet...please..."

Blind terror seized Naruto's heart, and he clenched his arms around the Jounin as if holding on as tight as he could would somehow keep the man from dying in his arms. This wasn't happening! Kakashi was indestructible! He was-

Flashes of the moment he'd arrived after Pain's attack on Konoha clawed mercilessly at him. NO! He wasn't too late this time!

Kurama!

The fox gave a growl of understanding, hunching his shoulders and pouring all his remaining chakra into Naruto in one fierce burst. Naruto had never tried to use the Space-Time Jutsu across such a long distance before, much less while carrying someone else. It was enough to get them back near the gates of Konoha, and another more focused skip had him re-materializing in the hospital lobby. He felt numb from the over-usage of chakra, but he kept his trembling hands gripped around the unresponsive body in his arms. In his

subconscious he could feel Kurama panting as he slumped to his side in exhaustion.

"Help me!" He screamed at the astonished nurse behind the desk, the golden cloak vanishing like mist and leaving him feeling even more drained. "*Kakashi-sensei is dying,**help me, please!"*

Sakura came bolting into the lobby at full speed, and somewhere in the back of his wildly panicking mind he suspected she'd been waiting in a room down the hall for him to return. Dropping to her knees, she rested her glowing hands on Kakashi's back and began barking orders to the night duty nurse. Her steady confident voice and fierce resolve were more encouraging than any gentle words of comfort could have been. But he still couldn't stop shaking. He couldn't get his heart to slow down.

"Prep operating room three with a bath, and get Hiroshi's team down here! Naruto, can you help me carry him?" She asked, turning her sharp concerned gaze on him.

He nodded briskly, frantically grabbing at the thread of hope she held out to him. Sakura would heal Kakashi. She could heal anyone!

It better not be far... Kurama grumbled, baring his fangs in concentration and summoning deeper reserves of chakra.

It isn't. Naruto felt his muscles burn with renewed energy, and he hooked one of Kakashi's arms around his neck while Sakura did the same.

You owe me, brat.

I know. Thank you.

Naruto allowed himself a subtle smile of gratitude and determination, latching onto the emotions so he wouldn't be overwhelmed with the cold grip of fear scratching at his insides. The next several minutes were a haze of following orders and stolidly planting himself in denial of anything but a happy ending to the nightmare. Carry him to the operating room down the hall. Take off his vest. Put him in the stone tub in the center of the floor. Be gentle, don't let his head drop back. Hold him there while the tub fills with something that isn't quite water. His heartbeat is becoming irregular. He has to stay in the water until Hiroshi's team complete the seals to get him stabilized.

Kakashi's eye suddenly snapped open, wide with alarm. Even half-dead the Jounin was strong enough to struggle against Naruto's attempts to keep him in the water, desperately trying to push him back. Naruto didn't have much strength left himself, but he locked his elbows and threw his weight into pressing down on Kakashi's

shoulders.

"Kakashi-sensei! Kakashi-sensei, listen to me, you have to stop! Stop moving!"

"Hold him still, Naruto, don't let him get up!" Sakura said from across the room, focusing all her attention on manipulating the chakra of the seals being created by the other team of four people.

The one dark eye looked straight at him in confused desperation, seeing nothing as trembling fingers clutched at the shoulder of his jacket.

"I'm trying! How much longer, Sakura-chan?!" He asked, willing Kakashi to see him, to hear him, to come back from the darkness that threatened to swallow him.

"Almost done, just hold him," she replied quickly.

"Kakashi-sensei, you don't have to get up, okay? Lie still, you're safe now!" The light was back. It was back! It was dim, but it was there, and he knew Kakashi could finally see him.

"...I am...?" Kakashi's voice croaked, sounding like metal grating on stone as his body went slack.

"Yeah, you are," Naruto nodded, tears of relief spilling down his cheeks as he carefully released his grip on the Jounin's shoulders.

Kakashi seemed to grimace a bit, gasping as if he wanted to say something. Naruto leaned subtly closer to hear what it was, then blinked in surprise as the Jounin's hand slid to the back of his head. Clumsy fingers twined in his hair, and he was too bewildered to resist the weak jerk of pressure that put his forehead right against Kakashi's. He felt his cheeks prickle and burn as the blood rushed to his face.

...wait...what's going on?...

"Naruto..." Kakashi said quietly, looking straight into the wide blue eyes. ***"I am going to kick your fucking ass...! I promise!"***

"...what...?" Naruto replied intelligently, staring blankly at the man as his hand slipped off his neck. There was an odd satisfied smile beneath the mask as Kakashi's eye closed. "Wait, what do you mean?! What did I do?!"

There was a bizarre sense of comfort threaded in with the dread creeping into his chest as he sat back on his heels and stared at the far wall. At least he was absolutely certain Kakashi wouldn't die, because the Jounin was going to live to keep that promise. Exhausted, baffled, and now thoroughly convinced he would never see his nineteenth birthday, Naruto just sat there and tried not to cry.

"Hey, Naruto, pull yourself together," Sakura said, her tone kind but insistent as she hooked her arm under his and carefully pulled him to his feet. "Come on, you can rest in a room down the hall."

"Sakura-chan, I don't want to die..." he said, looking at her beseechingly as he fumbled to get his boneless legs steady.

"What are you talking about?" She asked, looping his arm around her shoulder and peering at him with confused concern at his despondent expression.

"Kakashi-sensei is going to kill me, Sakura-chan! He's going to kill me! I'm going to die! I don't want to die yet!" He prattled on, his voice rising in fright as they walked out of the operating room.

"Why? What did you do!" She demanded, scowling at the blonde.

"*I don't know!"* He wailed, flinging his free arm out and dropping his head. "But just now he said...he said..."

"Naruto..." Sakura sighed, leading him to a bed in a small empty room. "Kakashi-sensei was delirious. Sort of like how you are right now. He's not going to kill you."

"Honest?" He asked, collapsing onto the bed face-down.

"Honest. Now get some rest," she said, her voice holding an echo of a gentle tired smile.

He was dimly aware of a blanket being settled over his back, and he tried to reply before sleep overcame him. He was pretty sure he failed miserably. It took two days for Kakashi to be released from the operating room. He was still unconscious, and according to Sakura and Tsunade he would likely remain that way for at least a week. Bribed with assurances to tell him when Kakashi woke up, Naruto finally allowed himself to be non-violently kicked out of the village and sent off on a mission.

True to their word, a week later he was roused from his sleep by the small messenger toad he'd left with Sakura and Tsunade. The toad didn't exactly appreciate the enthusiastic hug after relaying the information, and vanished in an angry little puff of smoke. The blonde went back to bed with a lighter heart and renewed energy for the next day's work. The joint mission with Kiri in the Land of Water proved more difficult than anticipated, and the weary shinobi didn't pass through Konoha's gates for another two weeks.

It felt like it had been half a year since he'd seen the village, even though spring was only just beginning to give way to summer. A shower, a hearty meal at Ichiraku, and a night in his own bed were his first priorities. Tomorrow he'd ask Tsunade about Kakashi when he handed in his somewhat late report. He had little doubt that the Jounin was out of the hospital. Even the possibility of him being off on assignment wasn't out of the question. What he didn't expect to find the next afternoon was the man himself walking through the market district as Naruto made his way to the Hokage's office.

"Ah, Kakashi-sensei!" He called out, raising his arm and running toward the familiar back.

Naruto knew he was grinning stupidly, but he didn't care and all thoughts of turning in his mission report were swept away. The warmth of relieved joy turned frigid in an instant as his

brain recalled a very important and very terrifying memory. ***'I am going to kick your fucking ass...! I promise!'***

His body seized up, his eyes going wide as he frantically tried to screech to a halt and spin around to run away. There were too many people milling about, and he ended up flailing to avoid crashing into an old man as his feet slipped out from under him. The hard dirt road knocked the breath out of him, and he gaped at the clear sky from where he lay on his back.

"Naruto, what are you doing...?" Kakashi asked with lazy curiosity, leaning over with his hands in his pockets to peer down at the young man.

An irrational hope surged through him. Maybe Kakashi had forgotten! "Huh? Oh, nothing!" Naruto forced a laugh, arching his neck to look up at the Jounin hovering over his head. Kakashi was wearing his standard issue long-sleeved shirt, but not his forehead protector or vest. He probably had the day off. "I'm just happy to see you out of the hospital."

"You have an oddly dangerous way of showing it," Kakashi replied, canting his head and arching an eyebrow.

Naruto rolled over and pushed himself to his feet, scrubbing the dust out of his hair. "Ah, sorry." He paused and craned his neck forward, scrutinizing the dark circles under Kakashi's eyes and the strained pallor to the visible part of his face. "Wow, you look terrible!"

"Why, thank you..." the Jounin said dryly, his shoulders dropping in mild exasperation.

"No, I mean it," Naruto continued with concern, looking the rangy man up and down. The shirt and dark pants were loose and casual,

hanging off him in a way that disturbed the blonde. "You've lost weight. Are you sure you should be out here?"

"It's okay, Mommy," Kakashi said sweetly, leaning forward a bit with a patronizing smile. "I'm big enough to walk around by myself now."

Naruto felt his face turn bright red, and he hunched his shoulders as he glared heatedly at the Jounin. "You'd have said the same thing to me..." he grumbled.

"Well, until you pass the Chuunin exam, I'm contractually obligated to because I'm your *sensei,*" he said, emphasizing the title and looking far too pleased at being able to ruffle the blonde's feathers.

"Shut up," Naruto scowled and turned his head away. "It's not my fault Shikamaru won't let me take the exam." He heard the man chuckle and start to walk away. "Hey, Kakashi-sensei," he shook off his anger swiftly, hopping forward to fall in step beside the taller Jounin. "Um...are you...are you still mad at me?"

"Why would I be mad at you? What did you do!" Kakashi asked with a mixture of confusion and suspicion as he looked sharply at the blonde.

"I don't know!" Naruto insisted desperately, waving his arms and side-stepping to face Kakashi fully. "I was hoping you'd tell me what I did before you killed me."

"What are you talk-" he cut himself off, pausing in the middle of the street as comprehension dawned on him. "This is about what I said in the hospital, isn't it? Okay, no, Naruto, I'm not mad at you. I was...sick. Very, very sick," he said, closing his eye briefly and grimacing a bit as he shook his head. "And when you see Sakura, you be sure to tell her I said these exact words to you: Thank you very much for saving me."

Naruto blinked at the genuine smile of gratitude, feeling his cheeks start to burn again. "Heh, that's why I'm here," he grinned, scratching his head and kicking out a heel in embarrassment. "Wait, why do I have to tell Sakura-chan?"

"Mmm...probably because she said she'd break my legs if I didn't show some appreciation," he shrugged, tilting his head thoughtfully as he started walking again.

"What?!" Naruto laughed in surprise as he walked along.

"She was pretty concerned about the way you were so convinced I was going to kill you when I woke up."

"Well, you were pretty damn convincing."

"You really thought I was going to kill you?" Kakashi quirked an eyebrow and looked at Naruto.

"I wrote out my will the next day."

"Ahh, it's nice to know I still haven't lost my touch," he sighed in deep satisfaction as they stopped in front of a vegetable stand.

"Ha ha," Naruto snorted wryly.

Lacing his fingers behind his head, he gave the potatoes an unappetizing look as Kakashi made a purchase from the old woman sitting on an empty crate. His eyes widened in shock as he glanced at the Jounin. His hands were bandaged, a few places shadowed with what could only be blood. Confusion warred with something more painful as he watched a transaction that appeared to be somewhat routine.

Kakashi pointed out a few specific vegetables, and then held out his money purse. The old woman smiled, filled a bag with the indicated items, took the right amount of money from the purse, and then looped the handles of the bag over his free arm. It trembled subtly under the weight. He thanked the woman with a smile and turned to walk away. For several seconds Naruto stood rooted to the spot, completely understanding and yet completely unable to understand what he just saw.

"If you're going to stand there, you should buy something," Kakashi called over his shoulder. "It'd do you good to eat real food every now and then."

"I...I don't need you to tell me about my diet, you scarecrow," Naruto snapped, though there was no conviction behind the insult. He jumped into a trot to catch up to the Jounin as he paused in front of a fruit stand. "I'm paying," he said defiantly, stepping up next to Kakashi and looking straight at the confused vendor. For whatever reason, he couldn't stomach the idea of watching the same scene again.

"Now, just a minut-"

"Put your hand in your pocket, I'm paying!" Naruto insisted, shaking his head as he continued to stare down the now concerned man behind the fruit stand. He could feel Kakashi's gaze on him, but he refused to meet that dark eye or even acknowledge the building anger behind it.

"You..." Kakashi paused, then gave an irritated sigh. "Fine. Double the order, please, and throw in a few of those star fruit while you're at it. I'd also like two bottles of that plum wine you're so famous for."

"Oi!" Naruto protested, turning to face the Jounin as he went on a spending spree.

"What? You've decided not to pay?" He tilted his head challengingly, sliding his hands into his pockets.

Naruto narrowed his eyes stubbornly. "You're worse than Ero-Sennin was," he growled, pulling out his money pouch and paying the vendor before taking the two bags of items.

"You should learn not to volunteer your money so readily for foolish reasons," Kakashi drawled as they resumed walking.

"Well, whatever. I owe you for wasting that food before," he shrugged with a show of nonchalance, inwardly weeping at how empty his purse was. For a few minutes they walked in silence, and since his own apartment was depressingly lacking in food he bought a handful of onigiri for himself as well. The store that sold his favorite cup ramen was on the other side of the village. "Hey, Kakashi-sensei?" He inquired hesitantly as they headed toward the Jounin's place.

"Hmm?"

"What happened to your hands?"

"I burned them trying to cook fried rice," he replied amiably.

Naruto gave him a flat look. "You're a horrible liar."

"Only when it comes to the unimportant stuff," Kakashi shrugged.

"I don't think it's unimportant," he mumbled quietly.

"Then I suppose it's a matter of opinion."

"Does it hurt?"

"Only when other people keep asking questions about it."

The blonde let out a frustrated breath. "You should have Sakura-chan look at your hands!"

"Naruto stop fretting, you're acting like an old woman," Kakashi sighed impatiently. "I have her look at them every day. It'll be healed in a week, just leave it alone."

...I don't want to... "If you say so," he said softly, stopping in front of Kakashi's door.

"Turn in your late report before you're the one with the broken legs," the Jounin said, putting his back to the door handle before Naruto could try to open it.

"H-how'd you know?" He blinked, a wave of guilt washing over him as he only now remembered what his initial errand had been.

"You're so transparent," Kakashi chuckled.

"I am not..." Naruto grumbled, setting the Jounin's groceries down on the ground.

"Naruto?"

"Yeah?" He said, straightening up with an inquisitive look at the taller man.

"Welcome home." [Okaeri.]

The blonde felt his eyes go wide for a heartbeat at the subtle smile on Kakashi's face, a warmth flooding through him like liquid sunshine. Living alone meant he so rarely ever heard those words of greeting. The tension ran out of him like sand through a sieve.

He grinned, lacing his fingers behind his head and rocking back on his heels. "I'm home!" [Tadaima!]

"Get going."

"Right! I'll see you later, Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto said brightly, lifting his hand as he turned to leave.

He stretched his legs into a lazy walk all the way to Tsunade's office. Her justified complaints about his report being late were met with his impertinent demands for information on Kakashi's condition. She caved after a healthy bout of yelling, as he knew she would, and his previous good mood faded like mist. A few hours later he walked down the street slowly, the small bag of onigiri banging against his leg. It was already evening, and he had a lot to think about after his conversation with Tsunade, as well as his visit with Sakura.

The poison had severely affected Kakashi's chakra system. Although the medicine he'd taken had helped him survive till Naruto had found him, the result of taking so much of it had caused a chain-reaction with the properties of the poison. They had flushed as much of both substances out of his body as they could, but the damage had already been done. His chakra was fluctuating dangerously, and a week ago he'd had to be confined behind a barrier in the

basement of the hospital so he wouldn't inadvertently electrocute someone who happened to be standing close enough.

Although it was beginning to stabilize to the point he was now able to contain it while he was awake, his hands and arms were injured because of the uncontrolled chakra surges that ripped out of him while he tried to sleep. The problem was that the more his chakra naturally recovered, the more violent the surges became. It was a vicious cycle, and all they could do was wait, watch and try to make Kakashi as comfortable as possible whenever they could until his chakra network ironed itself out.

Naruto looked down at his own hands, remembering what it had been like while training to learn the rasengan. The chakra had burned and made his hands so weak he couldn't pick up chopsticks. It had hurt so much he could hardly sleep. Still, it hadn't been as bad as what was beneath Kakashi's bloodied bandages. Sakura had said it would probably be another 7 to 10 days before his system stabilized completely.

The abrupt sensation of being watched by sharp piercing eyes jolted him out of his reverie. He looked around the dark street warily, his eyes settling on a cloaked figure wearing a white painted mask. ANBU. Startled at the way the man was crouching on the rooftop as if guarding something, he took a cautious step back. What was going on? Why was an ANBU-

Realization halted his own thoughts as he recognized where he was. His eyes went immediately to the upper floor of the building in front of him. A section was boarded up, some of the wood planks blackened as if scorched by fire. That was Kakashi's window. An overwhelming urge to run up to the Jounin's door and kick it in flooded him, the feeling made even more poignant by the unwavering gaze boring holes into him.

The ANBU was there to keep people away when Kakashi fell asleep and his chakra went wild, as well as patch the Jounin back up when it was over. He remembered Sakura saying something along those lines. The evidence on the boards covering Kakashi's window were enough to prove that the danger was very real. The man's body knew how to mold chakra and lightning in the most deadly way possible, and without restraint it would do so without regard for the safety of any innocent bystanders. He backed up another step, his skin crawling as the expressionless mask continued to stare at him.

Clutching his chest, he turned on his heel and stomped his way in the other direction. It hurt. Kakashi was suffering like that alone. He'd lost weight because of the constant stress on his body. His eyes were sunken and shadowed by dark circles because he couldn't sleep. His hands were ripped to shreds so much he couldn't even open his own money purse. It hurt! Naruto felt his nails dig into the flesh over his heart, and with a gasp he spun around and sprinted back the way he had come.

Naruto flicked a savage glare up at the motionless masked figure, daring the guard to try to stop him. The ANBU tensed slightly, but continued to simply watch like a gargoyle. He took the steps two at a time, skidding to a halt in front of Kakashi's door. He froze, trying to think up an excuse for being there that wouldn't get the door slammed in his face. Seriously...he really was fretting like an old woman.

Think, think, think. He had to come up with something feasible. His brain ground to a halt. Feasible for what?! Why the hell was he there?! What was he going to try to do?! Was there actually anything he *could* do?! The door opened without warning, and he took a step back in surprise as Kakashi looked at him with weary curiosity.

"I didn't knock yet," Naruto said blankly.

Kakashi gave him a flat look and closed the door. Naruto kept standing there, not at all sure what he should do anymore. On one hand, he was fairly sure Kakashi didn't want to be bothered, and he still hadn't come up with a valid excuse for being there. On the other hand, he should probably knock on the door now that he'd been seen. It would look kind of creepy if he just left after being caught. Then again, it was probably looking a little creepy with him not doing anything. The door swung open again, and Kakashi leaned heavily on the frame.

"Are you going to be there the whole night?" Kakashi asked dryly.

"I hope not."

"Why are you here?"

"You told me to come back," Naruto replied without thinking, his mind working furiously as he tried to remember how to back up that statement.

"...what?"

"The cards," he said brightly, digging in his supply pouch and pulling out the item. "I owe you a deck of cards, remember? I figured it out. Almost. I can't quite get them to balance on my finger, but at least they don't explode anymore."

"Congratulations," Kakashi said without enthusiasm, holding out his hand to take the cards.

"These aren't yours," Naruto said somewhat apologetically, stepping forward but not handing the deck over. "I left the new pack I bought you at home."

Kakashi sagged in exasperation, letting his head drop and his arm flop back to his side.

"I use these for practice. There's a few missing and half of them are a little crispy around the edges."

"Good night," Kakashi said firmly, pushing himself off the frame so he could close the door.

"Wait," Naruto said, sliding his foot forward to stop the door. "At least let me show you."

"No. I'm tired," he said bluntly.

"It'll only take a minute."

"Go home."

"Please?" Naruto begged, grabbing the edge of the door.

"Unbelievable..." Kakashi groaned after a short pause, kicking the door open with his heel. "Fine. You'll just haunt my doorstep till I let you in, anyway."

"Heh, you know me well," Naruto laughed nervously, stepping into the tiny apartment and fumbling out of his shoes. The bed was gone. The walls, ceiling and floor were crudely patched in a few places and streaked with black cinders. "You've done some redecorating..." he said lamely, sitting down on an unscathed section of floor and crossing his legs.

"I'm going for the minimalist look," Kakashi said wryly as he closed the door and walked into the room.

"Hey, you know I've got half that book of haiku memorized," he said, pulling out a card and focusing his chakra down.

"Good for you. Hurry up and leave," Kakashi sighed, sitting on the floor beneath the boarded up window. He leaned his back against the wall and drew his knees up to rest his arms on them.

"An old silent pond / a frog jumps into the pond, / splash! Silence again," Naruto recited, placing the card on his fingertip and managing to hold it there for a split-second before it flew off.

"...okay, get out..." Kakashi said darkly. "You are not going to sit on my floor and recite poetry to me."

"Autumn moonlight / a worm digs silently / into the chestnut," he continued, ignoring the order with reckless abandon and balancing another card on his finger before it soared across the room.

"Are you listening?"

"Lightning flash / what I thought were faces / are plumes of pampas grass." Naruto didn't give any sign of acknowledging the question and focused more on dimming his chakra.

"You skipped a page."

"Ah, I always get those two mixed up," he grumbled, pulling out yet another card. "A summer river being crossed / how pleasing / with sandals in my hands!"

"I never should have let you in, you god damn pest," Kakashi growled, dropping his head wearily. "Not today, not two months ago, not ever."

"Light of the moon / moves west, flowers' shadows / creep eastward."

Naruto let a ghosting smile tug at his lips, balancing the card on his fingertip for a fraction of a second longer than the last time before it careened away. Kakashi was too tired to put up a real fight, and Naruto knew it. As he sat there blithely spouting the memorized haiku and scattering cards all over the floor, he suddenly realized that this was what he'd wanted to do. It was stupid and childish, but he wanted to be there until Kakashi fell asleep. He glanced up

at the clock on the wall after a little while, noting that it had been about 30 minutes since Kakashi had said anything or even moved.

"Darkened room / filled with sour plums. / Stupid perverts," Naruto said, craning his neck and watching for any kind of response to the ridiculous string of words he'd made up. When he didn't see any, he took a deep breath and slumped his shoulders. "I guess you fell asleep, huh," he sighed, crawling over to the wall and sitting next to the Jounin. "I'm sorry, Kakashi-sensei. I don't know why I can't keep from doing dumb things around you today," he said, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes and stretching his legs out in front of him.

Something thumped onto his lap and he nearly jumped right out of his skin in surprise. He stared down at his legs, frozen in shock as his brain switched off for several seconds. There was an almost audible click as the gears in his mind started turning again, screaming out three words:

WHAT?!

THE?!

FUCK?!

Kakashi's head was on his lap. ON HIS LAP! He couldn't be awake. Even if Naruto couldn't see his face clearly because the Jounin's head was turned away from him he knew with absolute certainty that there was no possible way Kakashi was awake and willingly using him as a pillow. The man was going to drool on him... HE WAS GOING TO GET KAKASHI-DROOL ON HIS LEG!

It occurred to his panicked brain that maybe he had fallen asleep too. He pinched himself hard on the arm and winced. Nope. The freaky twisted nightmare was still happening. There was no way this was happening! ...oh, god, why is this happening?!... He yanked at his hair, looking frantically around as if some random miracle would appear and rescue him. Kakashi's fingers twitched, and Naruto slapped his hands over his mouth to keep from breathing too loudly.

He was really going to die this time. Really and truly die. If Kakashi woke up like this there would be no saving him from a gruesome death. With any luck it would be quick. The Jounin's shoulder flinched slightly and a painful jolt ran up Naruto's leg, eliciting a muffled cry from behind his fingers. What the hell was that?!

He dropped his hands and shook them as the skin began to tingle. Confused, he stared at his arms where the hair was starting to stand on end. What was going on? It almost felt like that time he'd been caught out in a bad storm with lightning striking everywhere. A dawning feeling of horror drew his gaze to the scorched and blackened marks beneath the repairs around the small apartment. Eyes wide and face pale, he looked down at the unconscious man.

...ohhh, shit...

He caught a flicker of a wince on what he could see of Kakashi's face before the next jolt hit him. Gritting his teeth and choking back a yelp, he clawed at the air and forced the rest of his body not to move. He panted and idly wondered if there was smoke coming off the top of his head. At this rate Kakashi was going to wake up with his head resting on a pile of ash. He gave the silver hair a look of fearful astonishment and slipped into Kyuubi Chakra Mode.

He winced as his senses were enhanced by the glowing shroud. Kakashi's chakra was spinning wildly out of control, the sheer amount of it building up startling Naruto. He could smell the electricity in the air, and he wondered if he should play it safe and go into Biju Mode. An idea struck him as he looked down at his glowing hands, and he turned his focus inward.

Hey, Kurama. If I can give chakra to someone, that means I can take it away as well, right?

The fox opened his eyes thoughtfully, flicking his ears. *The way that guy's chakra is fluctuating you'd just end up killing him. After it surges it drops to practically nothing. If you drain him of chakra the downward spiral will bottom out before he can recover. That's probably why the medical ninja haven't been leeching his chakra this whole time.*

Naruto shivered at the blunt assessment. *What if I siphon it off when the surge hits its peak, pulling out the chakra that he would be losing anyway?*

I suppose it's possible if you mold your own chakra to resonate with his.

Um...will it wake him up?

...you're seriously asking me this...? Kurama rumbled dryly, his ears dropping in exasperation.

I am in a life or death situation here!

If he hasn't woken up already, then I doubt you diddling around with him a bit will.

Don't say it like that! Naruto shouted, feeling his face start to burn.

You're the one with a guy's head in his lap trying to figure out how to suck out his chakra, the fox grinned wickedly.

Cursing vehemently at the fox, he shoved his embarrassment and fury aside so he could concentrate. He could feel all the hair on his arm standing on end as he hovered his hand above Kakashi's shoulder. Kurama's presence filtered through his senses, guiding Naruto like a puppet. Not yet. It wasn't ready to break loose yet. Blue light zapped and stung his fingertips. Now!

Resting his hand carefully on the dark shirt, he closed his eyes and threaded his chakra into the violent lightning storm with Kurama leading him through the delicate process. It lashed out at him viciously, but he ignored the pain and let the unique signature mold into his own till they resonated at the same pitch. He imagined himself acting like a lightning rod, redirecting the chakra flares to himself and away from Kakashi. It was vital that he didn't try

to actually pull the storm out. He had to remain passive until the tempest ran its course. It dropped off abruptly, flickering into the distance like a match being thrown down a well.

Naruto drew his hand back and stared at the scorch marks blistering across his skin. They faded slowly away, not even leaving a dull ache as Kurama's chakra repaired the damage. If he hadn't been in Biju Mode his whole arm would have been flayed open. If he hadn't... He let Kurama's chakra drop as his gaze moved to Kakashi's bandaged hands. The bandages went all the way to the Jounin's shoulder, he'd felt them beneath the dark shirt.

He sighed and tilted his head back to look at the clock. Assuming the Jounin had fallen asleep right away, it hadn't even taken half an hour for his chakra to build up and explode. Rolling his shoulders and yawning heartily, he dug the book of haiku out of his supply pack on his belt and began to read. It was going to be a long night. Twenty minutes later he was again staring at the injuries being healed on his hand. He'd been able to thread his chakra into the storm without Kurama's guidance that time, and the fox closed his eyes sleepily as the cloak vanished.

He reached out to pick up his book again, and flinched back as he got an electric shock. Scowling at Kakashi, he shook out his hand and idly wondered if his hair was going to end up all cock-eyed as well. Tilting his head, he wondered if it was the man's lightning chakra nature that made his hair act so crazy. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Or was it on purpose? Maybe he used some kind of hair gel to get it that way.

Cautiously and slowly, he reached out his hand and let his fingertips brush the silver strands. He froze in place, watching very carefully for any sign of movement from the Jounin. It would be bad enough if Kakashi woke up with his head in Naruto's lap, but to find the blonde messing with his hair would spell the end of Naruto's existence. No movement, and the breathing remained steady and relaxed. Leaning forward just a bit, he let his fingers slip through the silver hair.

It was stiff as wire. There was no hair product, it was just naturally wild and thick. Naruto found himself fascinated by the texture, lightly twining a few pale strands around his finger. There was nothing soft about it, not like his own hair. It was like...like touching the pelt of a wolf.

The comparison made him grin considering how incredibly appropriate it was. What he was doing was about as dangerous as petting a sleeping wolf. No, it was more dangerous. If Kakashi woke up, he'd probably rip Naruto's throat out as well as punch a hole in his chest with a chidori. He should stop running his fingers through the silver wire. He should stop being so entranced by the wild texture.

A jolt of pain screamed up his leg and he snatched his hand back with a gasp. The skin on his arms prickled, and he whipped his head up to look at the clock. Crap! He'd spent half an hour playing with Kakashi's hair! *Had he completely lost his fucking mind?!* Taking deep breaths and desperately trying to ignore the heat burning his

cheeks, he wrapped himself in Biju Mode to weather the next storm as the Jounin's chakra rampaged.

When it was over he slumped against the wall and let the cloak fade away, scratching furiously at his hair with both hands. This was insane! He shouldn't be there! Naruto felt his stomach clench in hunger, abruptly interrupting his mental breakdown. As he paused and looked down at his belly, he also realized he needed to use the washroom. It was a sign. It was time for him to leave now while he had the chance. There was no avoiding getting up, and once he was up he was not sitting back down damn it!

Slipping out of his jacket, he rolled it up and set it aside. Very gently Naruto slid his hands under Kakashi's head and neck so he could scoot his leg out of the way, then replaced the impromptu pillow with his jacket. The older man didn't stir. Lucky! Tiptoeing across the room, he silently closed the washroom door behind him so he could relieve himself. Drying his hands on a small towel after washing them, he peeked out the door to make sure the Jounin was still sleeping soundly.

He quietly pulled an onigiri from his grocery bag and stuffed it in his mouth to keep his stomach from making any unwanted noises. ...seriously, I've been here too long... Opening the dresser on the far side of the room took a little time since the drawer felt like it was shaking the walls with sound in the totally silent room. ...way too long... He pulled out a shirt and spent another few minutes closing the drawer as noiselessly as he could. ...I never planned on staying this long in the first place...

He knelt in front of Kakashi and paused, building up the courage to swap his jacket with the dark shirt. ...it's time to leave... He glanced up at the clock, figuring he had about ten minutes to clear out of the place. ...I shouldn't be here... He could feel Kakashi's breath on his wrist through the mask as he gently slid his hand under the Jounin's head. ...Kakashi wanted to be left alone, and I should respect that...

The silver hair brushed the inside of his forearm as he cautiously removed his jacket. ...I need to leave now before it's too late... He carefully set Kakashi's head back down and waited a few tense seconds before breathing a heavy sigh of conflicted frustration. ...I need to leave... He picked up the book of haiku and ran his thumb over the faded cover before glancing down at the Jounin sleeping on his leg. ...I need to have my fucking head examined...

The hours passed by, the silence only interrupted by the rustle of pages turning and Naruto's occasional trips to the washroom before grabbing something to eat as he stepped back into the room. Each time he got up he told himself he was going to walk out the door, and each time he always found himself leaning against the wall broiling with humiliation at his lack of conviction. The clock mocked him, ticking away the minutes as if shaking a finger at him.

Since the window was boarded up, the only indication of the approaching dawn was to constantly check the clock. Kakashi's chakra would lash out between 20 and 40 minute intervals, so it wasn't predictable enough for Naruto to use it to keep an accurate eye on the time. At 5:00 am he stood in the middle of the small room after picking up all the scattered cards and pocketing them. He slid his arms into his jacket as he gazed at the clock.

The sun should be up, and he knew people would be starting to mill about in the early morning hours. This time he really was leaving. He couldn't stay there all day. It was stupid enough that he'd spent the night, but hanging out any longer would be suicidal. Plus, he had

the next two days off and there was something he really needed to do before he was sent out on another mission.

Kakashi had said he'd 'tossed' his mask; not thrown it away, not turned it in, not left it behind. It was an unquestionably preposterous idea based on semantics, but he'd never forgive himself if he didn't try to find it. He already felt like he was going mad, so he figured he might as well accept it and jump on in. His only regret was he wouldn't be able to worm his way into Kakashi's apartment to again make sure he had a full night's rest. He glanced at the sleeping Jounin sadly, knowing Kakashi would likely never let him into his place any time soon anyway.

Quietly picking up his now empty grocery bag and his shoes, he slipped out the front door. He felt like a cheating husband, it was ridiculous! Quickly slipping his feet into his shoes, he shoved the bag holding the onigiri wrappers into his pocket and took a deep breath. He was not going to let that entire night of personal lunacy go to waste. He had to wake Kakashi up before his chakra surged. Lifting a determined hand, he knocked on the door. He waited a polite amount of time, and then knocked again a bit harder. The door opened and the taller man looked at him in bewildered surprise, his eye slightly muzzy with sleep.

"'morning, Kakashi-sensei," Naruto said with a bright nervous smile. Shit...what the hell was he going to say?! "I...ah...I wanted to apologize for yesterday. I kind of barged in and started talking because I wanted to prove that I actually had been memorizing that book, but then I just kind of kept on talking and didn't stop, and I know that was rude because I'm pretty sure you wa-"

"Naruto," Kakashi interrupted with a sigh. "You're doing it again..."

"Ah, sorry, sorry!" He scratched the back of his head, taking a step back as he felt his cheeks warm up in embarrassment.

"Did you stay up thinking about that?" Kakashi asked, tilting his head and watching the young man's face with curiosity.

"Huh?" Naruto blinked, taken aback by the odd question.

"You look like you haven't slept."

"Well, yeah, sort of..." he mumbled, looking at the ground and trying to hide the guilt that washed over him.

"Sorry."

"Eh? Why?" Naruto asked, looking up in confusion.

"Ah, well, I've been edgy lately, and I probably said some things without thinking," Kakashi shrugged with a lazy apologetic expression.

"Heh, no worries. I do that all the time," he laughed, lacing his fingers behind his head. A delightful warmth flooded him, knowing he had been forgiven even if it wasn't for the real

crime. "Well, I'm sorry for waking you up so early, but I was planning on going on a little trip while I had some time off. I wanted to see you before I left."

"Oh? Where are you going?"

"I'm not sure yet, I'll just have to figure it out on the way," Naruto grinned and shrugged. "See you later!" He turned on his heel with a wave, and trotted off.

Kakashi stood in his doorway for a few minutes, looking in the direction Naruto had headed long after he'd lost sight of the lanky young man. He gazed down at his useless hands for a moment, staring at the untouched bandages that should have been in burnt and bloody tatters several hours ago. If he focused he could sense faint trails of golden light shimmering within the dark storm of his fluctuating chakra.

"Oi, get your ass down here," he growled loudly, not bothering to turn and look at the cloaked figure that dropped silently to the ground behind him.

"Yes, sir?" The ANBU asked.

"When did he leave last night?"

"He didn't, sir."

Kakashi slowly turned a baleful glare at the masked man. He was somewhat satisfied at the almost imperceptible flinch that stiffened the ANBU's back, and the reflexive way he swallowed his fear.

"If you tell anyone, I will peel the skin off of you like a grape."

"...understood, sir," the ANBU bowed and vanished into the floor as if sinking into water.

He walked back into his apartment and kicked the door closed with his heel. It gave a gratifying slam. Naruto's scent was everywhere, making the room feel infuriatingly bright despite its dismal appearance. His skin itched with the need to escape from his own thoughts. To drive back the hazy memories of a fever-induced delirium that wouldn't let him enjoy Naruto's company without twinges of loathsome guilt. Wishing he could pull at his hair, he had to settle for pressing the heel of his palm to his temple.

Kakashi snatched his hand back in horror, then clumsily and painfully combed his bandaged fingers through the silver wire to pull it down over his eyes. What the hell?! *What the fuck was that scent doing all over his **hair**?!* He stalked to the washroom, yanked off his mask, put his head in the sink, and turned on the cold water to rinse all of it away; the smell of sunlight, the sound of a voice that lulled him to sleep, and the irrational image of being curled up next to someone while they ran their fingers through his hair.

He lifted his head and stared into the mirror, the thick mop of silver wire hanging over his eyes and dripping water down his face and neck. The reflection stared back with an expression that frightened him. That look didn't belong on his face. It didn't belong there!

Those were not things he needed! They were not things he wanted! He'd managed to firmly suppress his desire for that stupid transformation, but somehow this felt so much worse.

"I really am, aren't I," he said quietly. "I am slowly going crazy..."

Act Like Nothing Happened

Kakashi walked into the Hokage's office slightly faster than usual. After a week unconscious, almost three weeks dealing with the painful effects of a wildly unstable chakra system, and another week and a half of rest and rehabilitation to get himself back in top form he was finally on the active duty roster. If he wasn't given something to do he would go insane. Hell, he would take a D-rank mission cleaning gutters with a grateful smile and a spring in his step at this point.

"My, aren't you eager today," Tsunade drawled with a little smirk.

"I'm always eager to fulfill my duties as a Konoha shinobi, Tsunade-sama," he replied with an overly sweet smile.

"I should put you under house arrest more often, your enthusiasm improves exponentially," she chuckled, holding out a piece of paper and an envelope with an official seal stamped on it.

"I would be eternally grateful if you didn't," Kakashi bowed, taking the items and reading the mission statement quickly. He lifted his eyebrows at the location of the assignment, surprised he was being sent well beyond Ishi. "Undercover work on a human trade ring the Land of Earth and the Land of Wind are trying to rout out? I know there have been a lot more joint efforts between hidden villages recently, but I'm surprised they requested us for this."

"Some of the rogue ninjas you took down in your last mission were involved in the kidnappings. According to the interrogation reports on the surviving members behind the political sabotage, they were there for negotiations. If the coup was successful, they wanted to secure a sea port so they could set up a new base for their...'business transactions'," Tsunade said distastefully. "Suna and Iwa have been trying to find out who's behind the ring for over a year. It looks like the group is finally feeling the pressure and attempting to move locations."

"Ah, that would explain why there were more Jounin-level fighters in the area than I had expected. So, if they're looking to branch out into the Tea Country, that would threaten our border with kidnappings as well."

"Exactly," she nodded, lacing her fingers together. "And that officially involves us in the undercover work Suna and Iwa are conducting. They have gathered enough information to give a definitive location being scouted for potential victims. It's a ryokan on the border of the Land of Earth. They see a fair amount of traffic during their busy season, so they hire temporary help every summer. You'll be traveling as an ordinary citizen, your papers are in the envelope. As soon as you're packed and ready Sai will take you to a large city near the Fire Country border. It shouldn't take you more than three days to reach the inn."

"Most of the mission requirements are specific to my tracking skills," Kakashi said, putting the papers in his pocket. "I'll be helping the retrieval unit?"

"You *are* the retrieval unit," Tsunade replied. "We've been using one-man surveillance, and rotating them out every few days with different Jounin from all three hidden villages to avert any suspicions. The ones actually doing the kidnapping are hired mercenaries very familiar with the local land. They are capable and cautious professionals who can not be underestimated. The set-up is always the same, regardless of who the group hires. The young woman is observed and 'courted' for around three weeks until the disguised mercenary's presence and attentions are accepted and even welcomed.

"She's then lured further into submission using post-hypnotic genjutsu tactics sometimes combined with mild drug doses to weaken her will and make the genjutsu more effective. They want her to leave willingly, without anyone else suspecting anything. Once they're a safe distance away from prying eyes, they cast a stronger genjutsu to put her to sleep for easy transport and the victim is handed over to shadow clones.

"Over the course of 19 months they have sent out several Jounin kunoichi to act as bait in potential locations. The surveillance teams were Jounin-level as well, and most of them former or current ANBU. Four of the kunoichi were picked up on separate occasions. The first three were dropped and abandoned, both by the mercenaries and the by the shadow clones when they discovered they were being followed. The fourth was tracked for a few miles until all traces simply disappeared.

"There were...pieces...found later along the borders of both Countries," she said quietly, glancing away before looking back at Kakashi with angry determination. "There was precious little left of the kunoichi, but there was evidence that she had been held captive for several days before she was killed. The examiner found residual signs of sedatives and a truth serum, so we know they were trying to get information out of her. This group needs to be stopped immediately, and this assignment may be the best chance we have before they find a new place to set up shop out of our reach."

"Who are my contacts?"

"The Suna shinobi will approach you when you arrive, and I'm fairly sure you'll be able to recognize Naruto," Tsunade said, standing up and crossing her arms.

"Naruto's on surveillance?" Kakashi asked in surprise.

"Naruto is the bait," Tsunade replied, looking him firmly in the eye.

"I'm sorry...Naruto is *the bait?!"* He took a step back, utterly stunned.

"His stamina allows him to maintain his transformation constantly without batting an eye, and it's so perfect for luring a kidnapper it's disturbing. I had a personal chat with the kyuubi, and he assured me that he'd be able to analyze and dissipate any genjutsu before it could disrupt Naruto's chakra enough to dispel the transformation. Ino has placed several blocks in his mind to keep him from revealing sensitive information, and Sakura is putting together an antidote kit for you."

"The entire mission is at risk with him there, he's too reckless!"

"Three months ago I might have agreed with you, but not anymore," she said, shaking her head. "That young man is growing up rapidly."

"Tsunade-sama!" Kakashi glowered, clenching his fists at his sides and wishing his anger wasn't being egged on by a twist of fear. "We have highly experienced kunoichi for these kin-"

"I will not send a shinobi out there to die!" She shouted, slamming her hands on the desk and staring him down with an unyielding will. "A highly experienced kunoichi is already dead, and that is why I chose *him!* He is out there because he is the only person in which I have every confidence to survive, succeed and return! He will survive because he is the strongest shinobi in Konoha! He will succeed because I trust him to keep a cool head this time!" She paused only long enough to take a breath, and her voice became low and dangerous. "He will return because you will make sure of it by hunting him to the ends of the earth, Kakashi."

There was a brief silence while he stood rigid with the desire to keep arguing, but there was no point and he knew it. All he was doing was wasting time. These kinds of semi-sacrificial missions were a part of the darker side of being a shinobi, and he'd participated in his fair share of them in the past. Naruto was already out there, and if he continued to resist he might be pulled from the assignment. That thought alone was more chilling than thinking about what he knew the young man would have to endure once he was captured.

"Understood," Kakashi acquiesced, the steel in his voice solidifying his resolve as he turned on his heel to leave.

Sakura was waiting in the hallway for him, a few paces from the door. "I packed everything as discreetly as possible with labels you can remove if you want to," she said, not looking up as she handed a small cloth-wrapped parcel to him. "The scroll will give you more detailed information on the seal that shows up on the toxin identification papers, and I wrote antidote recipes under the descriptions. Try to be as exact as possible if you have to mix something together."

"I got it," he nodded, then staggered half a step back as Sakura abruptly grabbed the lapels of his vest and buried her forehead against his chest. He could feel her trembling, but refused to weaken his resolve by giving in to comfort her.

"You bring him back, Kakashi-sensei," she said quietly.

"I will."

"She was eaten. *Someone* **ate** *her!*" Her words were choked out in a furious hiss, and she looked up with fear and rage glistening in her pale green eyes. "Promise me you'll bring that idiot back here in one piece!"

"I promise," he replied, not flinching from her gaze and letting the ice in his gut harden his heart.

Sakura blinked a few times as she let go of Kakashi's vest and stepped back, any tears going unshed while she searched his face for the slightest minuscule sign of a lie behind the

promise. A subtle fierce smile tugged at her lips, and she walked past him with her shoulders straight and her chin lifted. As he began walking in the opposite direction, he felt a similar smile ghosting at his mouth. They weren't pups and kittens anymore. It was a frightening and delightful sight watching the next generation stalk the halls with the confidence of true predators, and he knew she would tear him limb from limb if he didn't keep his word.

Preparing took longer than usual since he'd be traveling as a civilian, so all his equipment had to reflect a feasible cover story. He plucked a few books off his shelf, leaving the Icha Icha collection behind without a second thought. The parcel from Sakura was packed and hidden beneath clothes that gave no indication as to where he was from. He inspected himself briefly before leaving; dark blue long sleeved shirt without the swirl pattern on the shoulders, well-worn brown traveling cloak, brown trousers, a simple patch over his left eye, and of course his mask. His scar was visible around the eye patch, so the mask could be easily explained away as being used to cover more scarring.

Sai was waiting for him on the path that led to the main gate of Konoha, idly twirling his ink brush between his fingers. The young man's face and posture were as emotionless and unreadable as a white sheet of marble. However, the fact that he was fidgeting with his brush screamed out how anxious he was. With a flick of his wrist as he unrolled his painting scroll, a giant eagle was soon crouching next to them, and they climbed on its back without saying a word to each other.

The hours passed in silence, and, not for the first time, Kakashi was thankful for Sai's relatively quiet personality as well as his background in ANBU. Conversation wasn't necessary, they were there to fulfill a duty and that was all there was to it. Before sunset they were descending through the clouds toward the outskirts of a bustling city. They landed in a small clearing out of sight of the main road.

"Here," Sai said, turning and holding out a bookmark with a small falcon painted on it. "I'll be on border patrol until your mission is over. Once you release the seal around the edge of the paper it'll return to me with your location." He paused, his eyes flicking guiltily away for a second. "I was told to be on the watch for one of your ninken, but I thought a contingency plan might not be too out of line."

"It's appreciated," Kakashi nodded, briefly placing a hand on Sai's shoulder before jumping to the ground. "I'll be sure to contact you one way or another."

"Good hunting," he said neutrally as the Jounin started walking away.

"I'll bring him back, Sai, stop worrying." A light breeze stirred the leaves in the trees, but his sharp hearing still caught the whispered thanks before the eagle launched back into the sky.

He kept his pace brisk but casual, passing through the city with only a few stops for food supplies. Not being able to dash over the landscape made walking feel painfully slow and boring, but he used the time to focus his thoughts. Sakura's words haunted the back of his mind, and it burned him that his own advice to Naruto had set this entire situation up. He shook his head and pushed the irritating sensation of guilt aside, he couldn't afford to get ruffled or distracted by useless emotions. Each step he took he forced himself to face his internal demons, and then locked them securely away.

It took him two and a half days to reach the small village tucked in the mountains, and another two hours to reach his final destination. The late afternoon light was casting long shadows and he paused on the road, gazing up at the ryokan and attached teahouse where Naruto was boarded and working. He grimaced at the audacity of the kidnappers, the location was literally an hour from the border of the Land of Earth. After securing a room for 'an extended stay', he dropped off his bag and utilized the hot springs behind the inn to soak away the dust and sweat of travel.

He was joined by an unfamiliar face, and the two men spoke casually about nothing. By the end of the seemingly pointless conversation between strangers, he had all the information he needed on the current situation. The set-up was following the same pattern as the other disappearances, so the kidnappers would make their move within a few days. Kakashi stepped out of the hot natural bath and wrapped himself in a clean robe, mulling over what the Suna shinobi had told him as he walked back to his room.

When he entered the small teahouse that evening, he was shown to one of the traditional floor-level tables used in the establishment by an older woman. An idle glance around the place as he folded his legs to sit down sized up the dark-haired man in the corner that had been described to him. He was broad-shouldered and compact with muscle, but he sat with a lazy good-natured air of being harmless. His clothing spoke of money, but not significant wealth.

The four other men there were seated in two groups; one alone and the other three hunched together as they discussed something important. He smiled slightly as he picked up the menu, catching the scent of sunlight mingled in with all the other unfamiliar ones. The flowery jasmine odor appeared to belong only to the older woman, and the Jounin was beyond thankful that Naruto hadn't taken his role so far as to start wearing perfume.

Setting the menu down, the woman who'd seated him arrived silently at his elbow a few seconds later to take his order. As politely as he could, he requested the food be sent to his room after he'd finished his tea. A flash of gold out of the corner of his eye had him turning to look straight into Naruto's wide eyes from across the room. Her long blonde hair was pinned up loosely with a comb and two silver picks that had bits of red glass embedded in the ends. Both the brown casual kimono and cream obi she wore were plain and undecorated, denoting her status as a worker on the bottom of the ryokan's totem pole.

"Kak—nichiwa," the young woman sang, just managing to catch herself from saying his name as she gave him a bright welcoming smile.

Kakashi forced a neutrally pleasant return smile and looked away nonchalantly. ...I am going to throttle that idiot... He'd braced himself for the inevitable confrontation of that damn transformation, but seeing her was a bit more shocking than he had expected. Her mannerisms were closer to the wide-eyed flirty ditz from years ago, but they were mixed with hints of the underlying smooth sensuality of that dangerous vixen he'd been dreading.

The shock for Kakashi was that he didn't find himself overwhelmingly attracted to her anymore. He had worked hard on suppressing his feelings, but it was still somewhat surprising to find his desire genuinely cooling off. This was the first time he'd seen Naruto at

all since that last very unsettling morning, so maybe he was finally regaining his sanity! Collecting himself, he let his gaze wander lazily to take in the full scope of the place.

"Come on, Nina-chan, why don't you ever greet me like that?" The lone man in the corner teased in a voice just loud enough for all the customers to hear as Naruto knelt to set a plate of food on his table.

"Because I see Masato-san so often I would lose my voice, and then I wouldn't be able to greet him at all," 'Nina' replied coyly. "And if I couldn't greet Masato-san I would cry. Masato-san doesn't want to make Nina cry, does he?" she pouted teasingly before smoothly standing up and walking toward Kakashi.

Her response was also meant to be heard, and it drew amused chuckles from a few of the other patrons. Obviously the little game between the two was a standard affair.

"I'm sorry if I embarrassed you," she said in a quieter tone as she knelt down, setting a cup of steaming tea in front of the Jounin with a sweet smile. "My name is Nina, and I'm still a bit new."

"It's no trouble," Kakashi shrugged and put on an amiable expression. "I'm Kyou."

"Will Kyou-san be staying for a meal?" She asked just a bit too eagerly.

"Ah, no, I prefer to eat in my room," he replied, trying not to sound rudely blunt.

"Kyou-san is so shy," she wrinkled her nose with an adorable giggle as she stood up to walk away.

Kakashi gave her a faint tolerant smile at her bold teasing. Where the hell had that punk learned to giggle like that?! He hated to admit it, but Naruto was proving to be very good bait. Maybe a little too good. Most of the occupants of the teahouse were wistfully following the lithe movements of the cheerful blonde. Masato, however, watched her with distinct attention, and Naruto obligingly paused longer at his table than any of the others. Kakashi finished his tea much quicker than he'd expected thanks to the unwitting decoy, left his payment on the table, and strolled leisurely back to his room.

After a quick check to make sure no one had touched his belongings, he pulled out one of the books he'd brought while he sat at the low table against the wall and waited for his meal to arrive. It had been a while since he'd needed to research different tracking methods. Tsunade's description of the kidnappers and victim 'disappearing' worried him, and it was going to take a significant amount of time and effort to follow them if they were using some sort of Space-Time or Summoning Jutsu. It wasn't long until he sensed a familiar presence stepping up to his door, and he lifted his eyebrows in surprise.

"I've brought your meal, Kyou-san," Nina's voice called politely from behind the door.

"Ah, thank you," he replied, closing the book and returning it to the backpack.

"Sorry for the intrusion," she said, sliding the door open from where she knelt. She picked up the tray laden with a light meal and a pot of tea that was next to her, and stepped into the room.

"This is a long way to walk from the teahouse just to set my table," he said, resting his elbow on the table to prop up his chin. *"Didn't the Suna shinobi tell you I was coming?"* He asked, keeping his voice barely audible as Naruto knelt down next to the table.

"Ah, well, I wanted to apologize for teasing Kyou-san. I thought perhaps I had made you angry with my bad habit of being too familiar. I didn't mean to be rude." She ducked her head meekly as she began moving the items from the tray. *"He wasn't sure you'd be able to make it. Kakashi-sensei, how long are you here for?"* She whispered, just as softly.

"There's nothing to apologize for, I'm not angry. Nina-chan is Nina-chan," he shrugged neutrally. *"Till the mission's over."*

Her head snapped up, relief glowing in her wide blue eyes. "Thank you, Kyou-san," she said, her smile threatening to blind the Jounin. *"You're my retrieval unit!"*

"I told you before, didn't I? It's no trouble." He impulsively reached out a hand and gently tapped Naruto on the forehead with one finger as he nodded. *"Yep."* His affable smile faltered a bit in confusion as the blonde abruptly ducked away again, scrambling to stand up with a polite bow.

"Kyou-san is too kind to me. I'll let you eat in peace, please enjoy your meal," she said quickly, her cheeks slightly flushed with embarrassment as she darted out of the room and slid the door closed behind her.

What the heck was *that* all about?! Kakashi looked down at his hand, flexing his fingers and wondering if he'd accidentally given Naruto a little electric shock. It certainly didn't feel like he had. He shook his head, slipping his mask down to eat. Naruto had been in a woman's body too long, he was starting to react like one without even trying. He needed to get out of that stupid transformation! Kakashi paused at the force of the thought, a little startled at himself. He shook his head and finished his meal. The mission was making him edgy already.

He spent the rest of the evening reading on the ryokan's wrap around porch outside his room. The few times a patron walked by he flipped to an inserted false page, just in case someone might glance down to see what he was reading. The Jounin was about to turn in for the night when a familiar scent drifted up to him from the direction of the teahouse, and he heard the giggling whispers of two young girls standing farther down the porch.

He closed his book and glanced over with idle curiosity. While he didn't have a clear view of the teahouse, he could see the lit pathway that connected it to the ryokan and the two figures walking down it. Their voices were too quiet for him to hear, but Naruto's body language made it obvious that Masato was laying the compliments on thick. The two pre-teen spies were just about dancing in place as they watched Masato lift the blonde's hand to his lips to bid her good-night.

For some ungodly reason the sight truly irked Kakashi. It had been carefully staged out in the open so anyone could see it, and he was very certain word would spread quickly as the two young girls squealed quietly and darted into their room. Naruto reacted in a slightly similar fashion, lifting her free hand to her mouth and ducking her head in embarrassment. As soon as Masato let go, she bowed with swift flustered politeness and scurried back to the teahouse. Kakashi forcibly relaxed his tight grip on his book, pushing himself to his feet and walking back into his room.

He fell into a restless sleep that night until the sensation of knowing something wasn't right crawled across his nerves, waking him up fully while he instinctively focused chakra to sharpen his senses. Someone was standing in the tree line at the edge of the ryokan's grounds. There was a soft shuffling sound as a door was slid open in the distance, and light footsteps jumped off the porch. The only one it could be was Masato, and he joined his hidden companion for a few brief seconds. Kakashi narrowed his eye and concentrated, straining to hear what they were saying to each other.

"How long?" A raspy voice asked.

"A day or two, and I'll get a taste," Masato replied.

"Good, don't fuck it up by damaging the merchandise."

"Suck my nuts, dickhead. I know what I'm doing."

Masato darted back to his room, and the other presence swiftly faded into the distance. Kakashi lay there in the dark, listening to the crickets chirping outside. He could feel his hackles rising with agitation, and he knew he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. His mind wanted to wander down unnecessary roads, but he hauled it back in line and forced himself to recall everything he'd read that day word for word.

The instant he heard the first rustlings of the staff moving about in the early morning he slipped his shoes on to take a walk around the area. He made sure to wander randomly along the small paths that circled the hot springs as far as he could go without looking out of place. By the time he returned he had a fairly clear mental picture of the two men prowling about the previous night. They were highly adept at hiding their tracks; a skill level of exceptional hunters and thieves. Tsunade's information had been more than accurate.

These guys were being cautious, and they were professionals capable of giving the best tracker a run for their money. Even their scents were muted, and he suspected their clothing was laced with some of the pungent herbal grasses found in the area to mask their own smell. Kakashi stood at the edge of the path that led up toward the ryokan, his expression sharp as he looked at the open windows of the teahouse. A figure leaned on her arms against the railing, her gold hair shining in the morning sun as she gazed at the mountains in the distance.

With Nina playing coy, Masato would need to do something to make Naruto drop his guard or the genjutsu wouldn't be completely effective. The Jounin narrowed his eye, a feeling close to bloodlust smouldering in the center of his chest and making him bristle. He caught

the faint sound of a raised voice in the distance telling her to come eat, and the blonde looked over her shoulder into the room with a bright smile before leaving the window.

He remained motionless for several minutes, feeling his senses hone down to a razor's edge while he glowered at the vacant window. Naruto's guard would never be dropped. Kakashi turned and walked silently up toward his room. Not while *he* was the one doing the guarding. Knowing the teahouse wouldn't be ready to serve breakfast to the patrons for a while yet, he took a leisurely stroll through the halls of the ryokan to settle his nerves.

It really was a nice quaint place, the wood dark with age and warm with careful tending. Even the flower arrangements scattered about on small tables were done by experienced hands. Well, most of them were. He chuckled to himself as he paused to look at one, wondering if Naruto was being roped into learning the art. The prickling at the back of his neck as he sensed the blonde approaching from around the corner brought his head up in surprise. There was always something surreal about seeing a person the instant after you started thinking about them.

"Good morning, Kyou-san," she said brightly as she turned the corner and stopped at the sight of the taller man. She was carrying a short stack of sheets and towels. "I hope you slept well."

"'morning," he replied with an amiable smile, sliding his hands into his pockets. "I slept well enough, thank you. You're not working in the teahouse today?"

"No, I'm working in the ryokan for the weekend."

"Ah, so Nina-chan will be bringing me all my meals for two days," he said almost dryly. He was careful to make it sound as if he wasn't entirely sure that the arrangement was going to be a pleasant one, knowing the young man stepping out of the room a few doors down the hall could hear their conversation.

"Mm-hmm," she nodded, tilting her head with a sly smile at his tone. "And Kyou-san will grow fat because of it. Then he will never leave."

"We shall see..." he said with a slight chuckle as he stepped past the blonde. *"Be ready, he'll try something today or tomorrow,"* he hissed, then nodded politely at the young man walking toward him and adjusted his stride so Naruto was momentarily blocked from the patron's view.

Kakashi had no reason to go to the teahouse if Naruto wasn't working there, but he didn't want to make himself seem like a complete hermit. So, he sat near the open windows and gazed at the snow-capped mountains far in the distance as he ran through every scenario he could think of that might take place in the next few days. Masato wasn't sitting at his corner table, and Kakashi fought the urge to tap his fingernail on the edge of the ceramic teacup.

When he returned to his room he checked his belongings and sat down at the table, unrolling the scroll Sakura had given him. The seals were categorized by primary type of effects, and then further grouped by specific drug components. The toxin papers were limited with what they could identify, and anything too complex wouldn't even bring a result. Still, the

kunoichi's pet project she'd been working on developing for the last year was enormously better than having nothing at all.

"I've brought your meal, Kyou-san," Nina's voice interrupted him.

"Come in," he said, rolling up the scroll and sliding it into his pack.

"Sorry for the intrusion," she smiled politely as she opened the door and walked into the room. *"Kakashi-sensei, can you stay outside today? He doesn't like to corner me in the halls where the hostess might see us,"* she whispered, kneeling at the table to serve the small breakfast. Kakashi could see the subtle nervous tension in Naruto's neck and jaw.

"I seem to remember you threatening to fatten me up," Kakashi drawled with a hint of amusement, resting his chin in his hand and glancing at the humble meal he'd ordered. *"Sure, I can read in the garden. It's got a good view of the grounds."*

Naruto's posture abruptly stiffened, and she shot an angry horrified look at the Jounin before smoothing it into a light sigh as a couple walked by the open door. "Ah, Kyou-san does present me with a difficult challenge, but I'm not going to give up yet," she laughed. *"You did* ***not*** *bring your porn collection here!"* She hissed furiously, glaring at Kakashi as soon as the coast was clear.

"I'm sure you won't," he replied with a tolerant smile. *"Why? Did you want to borrow it for pointers-"* The sharp whack of the empty tray over his head cut off the sentence, and he bit back the urge to snicker.

"Enjoy your meal, Kyou-san," she sang, setting the tray down and standing up. *"I hope you choke on it..."* she growled, turning on her heel and walking out the door.

Kakashi rubbed the little lump on the top of his head and chuckled silently after the door had shut. Well, at least that had prodded Naruto away from his doubts for the time being. Focusing on worries tended to give the blonde tunnel vision, and a distraction always helped to shake him out of it. He tucked into his meal, praying Naruto wasn't going to start sneaking sugar cubes into his rice as pay-back.

As requested, he sat on a small bench in the garden under a gnarled twisted tree whose branches sprawled out like an umbrella against the bright sunshine. A few hours later Naruto and a petite brunette wearing a similar brown kimono and an intricately patterned obi – as opposed to the plain one the blonde had – walked into the garden together carrying baskets in the crooks of their arms. From the vaguely familiar look of her pretty features, he guessed she was the daughter of the hostess.

It took an enormous amount of willpower not to break a smile and just bust out laughing as he listened to the brunette, Maia, give Naruto advice on which flowers to pick to make a suitable arrangement. Apparently the blonde was woefully undereducated when it came to that specific art form. He flipped the pages of his book to one of the false inserts, pretending to ignore them.

All humor faded in an instant as an unpleasantly familiar scent drifted on the wind from the ryokan, and he felt his hackles rise. Masato strolled up to the pair of young women with a pleasant greeting, and politely inquired as to what they were doing. Naruto explained with a touch of shyness, and Kakashi was startled to see her cheeks turn pink in embarrassment as Masato leaned forward to peer into the basket she held. He was even more startled at the ire building up in him because of it.

"Ah, so you're making flower arrangements today," Masato nodded, straightening up and glancing around the garden as a couple wandered through. "It's quite an art, isn't it. Perhaps I could make a make a small request?" He picked a red rose and held it out to the blonde with a gentle smile. "Use this one."

"I... But it doesn't suit me, Masato-san," she replied, ducking her head as her blush deepened. "It's far too grand a flower for someone such as me."

Kakashi felt his eye twitch in agitation and...disgust? He quickly reined in the impetuous emotions, pissed at himself for feeling them in the first place when there was no damn reason to. What he'd really like to know was how Naruto was pulling off the real blushing. Altering his transformation on cue with that kind of realism was dangerous when he was so close to someone who knew how to mold chakra. Even if Masato wasn't a sensory type, he might be able to pick up the spike in chakra at the changes.

"Nina-chan shouldn't say such things. I think anyone would agree this flower's beauty suits you perfectly," Masato said, looking around at the couple and the seemingly oblivious Kakashi. "The color is just right. Nothing else would do. Isn't that right?"

The couple paused as they were addressed, and the woman gave a sweet knowing smile to the furiously blushing Naruto. The man just chuckled and nodded, pulling the woman closer as they walked away. Kakashi looked up from his book with neutral interest as he was pulled into the conversation. He paused and narrowed his eye thoughtfully, looking Naruto up and down with almost clinical reserve.

"It seems to match her complexion at the moment," Kakashi chuckled with a hint of dry humor, then shrugged nonchalantly. "She looks more like a freesia to me, but it's probably because of her hair," he said with a shrug, turning back to his book with a show of apparent disinterest in the topic. It was hard to swallow the laughter at Naruto's indignant expression, but he flipped to another false page in his book and continued to pretend to read.

"The man obviously has no romance in his soul," Masato said softly, tucking the rose behind the blonde's ear with a smile. "I shall leave you two ladies to your task." He bowed and strolled back toward the ryokan.

...I have more romance in my little toe than you do in your entire being, you fucking hack... Naruto and the brunette giggled and whispered as they quickly finished gathering flowers. They ended up on the narrow stone path that wound its way past the bench he was sitting on, and the irrational imp in him wanted desperately to stick his foot out and trip Naruto so that stupid rose would fly off into the dirt. He scolded himself harshly, confused at the amount of aggression behind the desire.

Pain jolted across his foot, and his baffling anger warped completely around. That dirty bastard had nearly crushed his toes as she walked by, and Kakashi allowed himself a smile of amusement. Masato was again not in the teahouse when Kakashi sat down for his pre-lunch tea. It didn't surprise him, but it did make him impatient to return to the ryokan. Once he was back in his room, he didn't have to wait long for the familiar call outside his door.

"I've brought your meal, Kyou-san," Nina's voice said brightly.

"Ah, thank you," Kakashi replied, resting his chin on his palm as he sat at the table.

"Sorry for the intrusion," she said, opening the door and standing up to step inside. *"I take it back, Kakashi-sensei, you can keep your ass inside,"* she whispered angrily, kneeling down at the table to serve the meal. The rose was still tucked behind her ear, and it irritated Kakashi the way the dark red actually did compliment her tanned complexion.

"It occurs to me that I might have to apologize for my comment earlier. The color does suit you," he said thoughtfully. *"The man asked for my opinion, what was I supposed to do?"* He asked sardonically.

"Kyou-san is too kind, there's no need to apologize to me. I hope your day in the garden was pleasant, and I am sorry if we interrupted your reading," she said meekly. *"How about ignore him?! Or say 'Yeah, whatever'!"*

"It's an inherent risk when reading outside along a public path. It doesn't bother me much," he shrugged. *"I'll be sure to act more like a cold-hearted bastard next time, okay?"* He said sweetly.

"I think it would take quite a bit to bother Kyou-san. I need to learn how to be as calm as you are," she laughed brightly, setting the empty tray on the floor. *"What 'next time'?! There will be no 'next time'! I can handle this by myself, so you just stay in here!"*

"Nina-chan likes to challenge herself, it's quite admirable," Kakashi said with a touch of wry humor. *"I refuse,"* he sang with a saccharine smile. *"By the way, you're not manipulating your transformation to blush like that, are you?"*

"Kyou-san is teasing me. You will break Nina's heart," she pouted dramatically, placing her hand on her ample chest. *"No, Kurama's baiting me,"* she grumbled.

"I know better than to go anywhere *near* Nina-chan's heart," he said flatly. *"Wow, he's doing a hell of a job. Tell him to keep up the good work."*

"Kyou-san is a terrible liar," she giggled mischievously, standing up to leave and sticking her tongue out at him with a brief look of vexation. "Enjoy your meal," she bowed and slid the door closed behind her.

Kakashi shook his head and chuckled, slipping his mask to tuck into the food. His teeth crunched on the first bite of the white rice, his eye going wide for a second before he grimaced and forced himself to swallow the sugar cube that had been hidden within the rice.

...I am going to kill that punk... After guzzling a lot of tea and thoroughly examining of the rest of the meal, he managed to finish it without another incident of sabotage.

He was out strolling the paths around the inn when he caught sight of Masato talking to Nina on the porch at the far side of the inn where the laundry was hung out to dry. The basket of linen was half-filled next to her feet, and the broad-shouldered man was standing with his back to the Jounin. He resisted the urge to quicken his pace, keeping his legs swinging with long ambling strides.

Kakashi couldn't hear what was being said at that distance, only that Masato was speaking in a tone that gave the impression of kindness and excitement. The man leaned in and held a cloth-wrapped object out, peeling the white fabric away with a little flourish. At his urging she reached out to hold the gift up toward the late afternoon sun. It caught the light, refracting rainbows that dazzled and blinded the eyes enough for Masato to put his hands into his sleeves to hide the seals Kakashi knew he was forming.

The hair stood up on the back of his neck as he felt the weak chakra of a mild genjutsu tingle across his nerves while Masato stroked his fingertips down Naruto's jaw line. Every instinct in Kakashi's body screamed at him to get Naruto out of there, and he had to bite his tongue hard to keep his expression neutrally curious with his feet moving in a lazy rhythm. It was over in a few seconds, and Masato was curling the dazed young woman's fingers around the crystal.

"...st thought Nina-chan would like it," Masato said, the words finally becoming understandable as Kakashi got closer.

"Ah, thank you so much," she blinked, looking down at the crystal in astonished delight as her cheeks flushed. "Masato-san is too generous to a person like me." Her eyes darted to the approaching Jounin, then back to Masato, and finally down at her hands as she shyly twined her fingers together.

"Well, I'll leave Nina-chan to her duties," Masato bowed, his back stiffening as he realized the two of them were being watched.

The movement was tempered perfectly to look normal, and Kakashi knew it was an act. Masato had wanted to be caught flirting with her more intimately in private the same way he wanted people to see him court her openly. It would make the moment she left with him all the more believable. He walked off with a spring in his step, glancing at Kakashi with an idle smile of greeting. The lanky Jounin returned the smile placidly as he continued to walk right by the porch.

He flicked a look up at her, meeting Naruto's eyes briefly before looking away. Whatever had been done had been done, and there was nothing he could do about it right then without blowing the whole mission. Unfortunately, it was still too early to order his evening meal, so all that was left to do was to wait for the opportunity to speak to Naruto in relative privacy. He followed the porch around till he came upon the stairs. Naruto still needed to finish folding and putting the laundry away, so Kakashi wandered the halls looking at all the new flower arrangements to burn time and possibly catch sight of the blonde.

Kakashi ran into Naruto on his way back to his room with an extremely confusing and worrying result. The instant she spotted him she opened her mouth to say something, took one step forward, clamped her mouth shut as her face turned bright red and her eyes went wide with horrified disbelief, then spun on her heel and hurried away. He stared at the empty hallway, frozen in place as he wondered what the hell kind of genjutsu that asshole had used.

Being so weak and short-lived, the only thing it could have been was a suggestive plant. But even that shouldn't work with the kyuubi disrupting Naruto's chakra and snapping him out of it. The crystal Masato had given her bothered him, and a cold feeling of dread started to creep into his gut. He asked the ryokan hostess to send his meal to his room, not wanting to waste time sitting in the teahouse while Naruto was acting so strangely.

When he got back to his room he closed his eye and scratched at his hair for a moment to collect his thoughts. Rummaging through his backpack, he pulled out the scroll Sakura had sent with him and unrolled it on the low table. A worst-case scenario played out in his head as he skimmed through the various seals. Scowling at one particular set, he scanned the notes the kunoichi had written and made a few hurried preparations.

It only took him a few minutes to gather the things he thought he might need, and with a little luck he might not need the towels at all. He sat down so he was facing the wall instead of the door, tucking the one damp and one dry towel under the table. That would give Naruto the opportunity to kneel next to the table with his back to the open door instead of where he usually knelt with his side facing the hall.

"I've brought your meal, Kyou-san," Nina's voice filtered through the door, sounding subtly strained.

"Come in."

The cold feeling in the pit of his stomach got worse when she refused to look at him after opening the door. Naruto was very good at putting on a veil of simple nervous embarrassment, but Kakashi had known him far too long to be fooled. She took a deep breath and absently rubbed her forehead before turning to pick up the tray next to her. Her movements were deliberate and stiff as she stood up, and her cheeks were flush. Her pupils were dilated and her gaze darted and flinched, as if trying to avoid looking at something that was impossible to actually avoid looking at. There was an expression that bordered somewhere between pain, concentration, and panic being desperately hidden on her features.

"Ah, sorry for the intrusion," she said, still not looking at the Jounin while she set the tray down. *"We have a serious problem here!"* She hissed.

"You look a little flush, Nina-chan. Did you spend too much time out in the sun today?" Kakashi asked with neutral concern. "*What was the genjutsu?"*

"I don't think so. It was so nice out, a person should go out and enjoy it," she said thoughtfully, transferring the meal to the table with slightly trembling fingers. *"I don't know. Kurama's being a dick, he won't tell me."*

"That person should enjoy those things in moderation, or they'll make you sick," he replied somewhat sternly, broiling inside and wishing he could slam the door shut as a group of older men walked by. *"Ask him if it was post-hypnotic recognition, and did you already deliver Masato's dinner?"*

"Kyou-san sounds like a doctor. I think I'm just tired is all, there's nothing to worry about," she laughed lightly, setting the tray down on the floor. *"Yes I did, it was revolting and don't ever mention it again. Kurama says yes, it was sublinimun... What language are you two even speaking?! What does that mean?! How long am I going to be stuck like this?!"* There was a faint edge of panic to her voice, and she only dared to glance at him briefly with an agonizing mix of emotions in her eyes.

"Well, I'm not a doctor, but I know enough to tell you that you should probably sit down for a little while," Kakashi said, looking straight at Naruto with a sharp unflinching gaze as soon as the hallway was clear. *"Not long. I'll take care of it, don't worry. This is an old ANBU trick, just concentrate on your chakra,"* he whispered, reaching out and grabbing the back of her head before she could duck out of the way.

"Wha-"

Tightening his grip, Kakashi slammed Naruto's forehead down on the table top. She gave a yelp of pain and toppled to her side as she clutched her head, her golden hair spilling around her as her comb and silver picks came loose from the impact. The rose dropped to the floor where Kakashi could 'accidentally' crush it as he moved forward.

"Nina-chan, are you all right?!" Kakashi asked, his voice nothing but concern as he dug his fingers into the thin arm and leaned over with a scowl only the blonde could see. Sharpening his senses, he could feel Naruto's chakra fluctuating and threatening to break the transformation. *"Naruto, don't lose your focus!"*

"I-I'm fine," she forced a laugh through clenched teeth. ***"I'll fucking kill you, Kakashi!"*** She hissed venomously.

"I told you not to stand up," he scolded with a sweet unrepentant smile, idly noting the lack of an honorific at the end of his name. The smile vanished to a calm look of clinical concern as he gently pulled her back up to a sitting position so anyone passing by could at least see the side of her face.

"Is everything all right?" An older woman's voice called discreetly from the open doorway.

"Ah, it's fine, it's fine," Kakashi flashed the curious patron an amiable smile that had a touch of exasperation to it. It had the effect of giving the impression he didn't particularly want to be dealing with Nina, but that it also wasn't an imposition for him. He was neutral. Harmless. "She just tripped and bumped her head," he shrugged, producing a small first aid kit from his backpack.

"Oh, no! Nina-chan, what happened?!" The petite brunette who had been with Naruto that day in the garden bowed with swift apology at the door and scampered in to kneel next to her injured companion.

"I tripped and bumped my head on the table," the blonde replied in honest mortified irritation, casting her eyes to the side as if wanting to disappear. It was obvious she would have covered her face in shame if her head wasn't being bandaged up.

"Poor dear..." Maia sighed, then turned toward the Jounin and bowed deeply. "I must apologize for this terrible inconvenience, Kyou-san."

"It's not a problem," he shrugged with the same amiable smile he'd given the patron. "These things happen to everyone now and then. Ah, but...I don't suppose I could trouble you for some ice?"

"Of course! I'll bring it right back," she said and darted out of the room, leaving the door open. The curious woman had already left, seeing the situation had been taken care of and not wanting to be called rude by staring.

"*An 'old ANBU trick', my ass!"* Naruto flicked an angry glare at him.

"*Hey, it worked didn't it? It got your mind off of the problem long enough to collect yourself, and you'll be put to bed for the rest of the night."*

"*How the shit is that supposed to help?! I share a god damn room!"*

Kakashi tensed momentarily, staring at Naruto in shock before quickly schooling his features into a neutral expression at the sound of hurried footsteps approaching the door.

"There, all done," he said, tying off the bandages. "You'll be fine by morning, I'm sure it feels worse than it actually is."

"Sorry for intruding, Kyou-san," Maia bowed in the doorway before stepping in to hand over the small ice pack. "You've been far too kind."

"Heh, I suppose that happens to everyone now and then as well," Kakashi said with mild amusement, taking the bundle of ice and gently placing it on the blonde's down-turned forehead for her to hold in place. He glanced at another passer-by, and then leaned toward the brunette kneeling beside Naruto. "Could I convince you to close the door?" He asked, lowering his voice slightly and giving her a somewhat sympathetic smile. "I think Nina-chan has suffered enough tonight."

"Oh," she started, tilting her chin down at the sound of footsteps walking by. "I'll take her to her room, we've bothered Kyou-san too much."

"Not at all," he waved his hand lazily, reaching out to pour a cup of tea. "What would bother me more is if Nina-chan tumbled again just outside my door because she hadn't had time to recover," he said, handing the steaming cup to Naruto. "I'd feel responsible."

"We are not worthy of Kyou-san's kind generosity," the brunette said after a moment of hesitation, then nodded and stood up. "I'll leave her in your care until she feels well enough to walk again. Thank you very much."

Kakashi sighed with a touch of resignation, then chuckled off-handedly and pulled out a book from his backpack as if to start reading while he sat there.

"It certainly makes for an interesting night, if highly unexpected. I'm sure she won't be here long, you don't have to worry about it."

"I'm sorry, Kyou-san," the blonde said humbly as the door slid closed, and then promptly vanished in a puff of smoke. *"Oh my god, please tell me you can fix this,"* Naruto whimpered quietly, setting the teacup on the table and slumping against it to drop his head onto his arm.

It was no surprise he was still dressed in the kimono. Just getting the obi wrapped and tied nicely in the back required help, so there was no way he could simply transform into a copy of the uniform every day without people looking at him like he was a circus freak. Add to that the fact that he had a roommate, he'd need to hide the original clothing, figure out how to make them appear as if they'd been worn when he sent them to be cleaned, fabricate rips or stains on the transformed clothing in case of an accident, then duplicate it on the original, and it was plain easier and more practical to wear the damn dress.

"Don't worry about it. Drink your tea, you can talk when you're feeling better," Kakashi said as he quickly reached into his backpack for a piece of the toxin paper and the scroll he'd been reading earlier. He didn't have time to acknowledge the surge of grateful relief at seeing Naruto. The *real* Naruto. "*I can fix this,"* he said firmly, picking up the small knife that was in the first aid kit and brushing the edge under one of the young man's fingers.

"Also...please tell me it doesn't involve bloodletting," Naruto said wryly, glaring suspiciously at the inscribed paper Kakashi wiped across the shallow cut. It was just a scratch, so it would be healed in no time. "*I've think I've had enough old ANBU tricks for the day."*

"Nope, this trick is courtesy of Sakura," Kakashi replied, unrolling the scroll to match the seal that had appeared on the paper with one of the set he'd been looking at earlier.

His shoulders slumped in relief. At least it was a straight mild aphrodisiac, and not a mixed cocktail. The dosage was fairly low, but without the genjutsu to focus Naruto's mind on one person his body was simply reacting to everyone. A woman would have been able to deal with the effects of the drug much easier on a strictly physical level, and Jounin specializing in undercover work were trained to be prepared to handle these kinds of situations. Naruto was just too inexperienced for this. He was being mind-fucked. Almost literally.

"I would like to amend my previous statement," Naruto said ruefully, closing his eyes and cringing. "*Please tell me this involves bloodletting, because those old ANBU tricks of yours are awesome, Kakashi-sensei. Can't get enough of 'em."*

"Too bad for you she sent me quite well prepared," he sighed, giving Naruto a look of genuine pity for the cruel hand he'd been dealt that night. His brain automatically filed away the fact that the honorific had returned, but that was all the attention he gave to the thought. *"Do you still have that thing he gave you?"*

"*That cheap crystal? I wrapped it up in a cloth and hid it in my room after my body started wanting to whore itself out,"* he said with a healthy dose of caustic self-disgust, lifting his

head and watching as the Jounin put the scroll away and retrieved a small packet from his backpack.

"*Good,"* Kakashi nodded, picking up the spoon sitting next to his miso soup and tapping out a careful amount of red powder onto it. *"That was probably the source of the aphrodisiac. It's a type that can be absorbed through your skin on contact."*

"*What's that red stuff?"*

"*The solution to your problem. It's not going to be the most pleasant experience, but it'll be over in a few minutes,"* he said, adding a few drops of tea so the powder dissolved it into a liquid that resembled blood.

"*It can't be worse than what I'm feeling right now!"* He paused, sitting up and placing the ice pack on the table. *"What's it going to do?"*

"*It's going to make you sick, so you'll have to try to keep the noise down to a minimum if possible,"* Kakashi said, holding out the spoon. *"Just put it under your tongue to avoid most of the taste. I'll take care of everything else."*

Naruto nodded, shoving the spoon into his mouth as Kakashi grabbed the towels from under the table. He slung the damp one over his shoulder and unfolded the dry one swiftly so he could hand it to the blonde. The offering was none too soon, and Naruto snatched the towel frantically as his face blanched at the abrupt rebellion of his stomach. He buried his face in the white cloth, doubling over and trying to turn away at the same time.

"What was that? You want to know what I'm reading?" Kakashi asked nonchalantly, lunging forward and looping his arm around Naruto's shoulders to pull the young man in so he was half draped over his lap. It would be a great deal more comfortable for Naruto if he had something to lean on. "Oh, it's a book on migratory patterns," he continued, rambling on to cover the muffled sounds of violent retching and wishing that silly little brunette would stop wandering by to hover her ear next to the door. Naruto's elbows dug harshly into his hip and knee on one side, while his knees pressed into the Jounin's ankle and calf on the other. "You look confused, let me see if I can explain it a bit."

He kept letting the boring words spill out without paying much attention to them, instead focusing on the shuddering choking figure braced against him. Slipping the damp towel off his shoulder, he rolled it up and placed it on the back of Naruto's neck. The blonde's belly had to have been fairly empty to begin with, since staff wouldn't be served dinner till after the guests, and Kakashi sympathized with the pain of heaving up nothing but bile. He droned on about migrating animals, rubbing the heel of his palm along Naruto's spine to distract him a bit from his suffering.

The minutes were ticking slowly by, and each second of agony sapped more of Naruto's strength till he was barely able to keep the edges of the towel gripped at the sides of his head. Flipping the damp towel over so the cool side was against Naruto's neck, he hooked one arm around the heaving chest to keep the blonde from sliding off his lap. Somewhere in the back of his mind he registered the fact that there wasn't as much meat on the bones under his grasp than there was supposed to be, and that thought troubled him.

The spasms finally slacked off, then ceased altogether. "It looks as though I've bored you half to sleep, Nina-chan," Kakashi chuckled drolly, carefully taking the towel out of Naruto's grasp to bundle it aside. "I suppose it's not an interesting subject for most people, don't let it bother you. You should finish your tea."

The blonde's limp hands fell to the floor as he gasped for air, his body shivering and boneless. Kakashi gently wiped Naruto's face with a corner of the damp towel and shifted him back so his head was resting on his thigh instead of lolling next to it like a rag doll. His blonde hair stuck to his pale sweat-dampened cheeks as he stared lifelessly at the wall, not having the energy to even protest the fact that he was half sprawled over the Jounin's lap.

"*Can we just...not ever do that again...please,"* Naruto moaned weakly.

"*It's your own fault for perfecting that nasty little Jutsu of yours,"* Kakashi chuckled, reaching back to pick up the cup of warm tea off the table behind him.

"*I really hate you right now. Can I beat you up when the feeling comes back to my arms?"* He asked blandly.

"*Tell you what,"* Kakashi said, leaning over and wrapping Naruto's fingers around the ceramic cup. *"When we get back home, we'll have an all-out sparring match,"* he said, supporting Naruto's hands so the blonde's trembling arms didn't spill the tea while he lifted his head to drink it.

"*Can I use Sennin Mode?"*

"*Mmm...I'll concede to that,"* he shrugged.

"*God, I love you."*

"*Fickle as Autumn skies..."* Kakashi drawled cynically. Naruto glared at him and bit his wrist. *"Ow, damn it!"* He laughed softly, jerking his hand back and grabbing the empty cup of tea. *"That's it, get up you ungrateful punk, you're just fine now. We're running out of time anyway,"* he growled without malice, rapping the blonde hard on his bandaged forehead and shoving him off his lap as Naruto bit back a yelp of pain and clutched his head.

"*Maia's been eavesdropping, huh,"* Naruto mused with a touch of irritation, pushing himself up on wobbly arms to sit back on his heels. He picked up the damp towel that had fallen off his neck, scrubbing his face with it. *"I swear, that girl is going to trip over her own nose one of these days."*

"*Sounds like someone I know..."* Kakashi said with droll humor, picking up his bowl of soup and handing it to the young man.

"*I am not that bad!"* He protested with quiet force, absently folding the towel before setting it aside and taking the offered food.

Kakashi arched a brow and gave him a flat look.

"*...anymore..."* Naruto reluctantly corrected himself.

Kakashi remained silent.

"*...most of the time...*" Naruto darted his eyes away, putting the bowl to his lips. Kakashi continued to remain silent.

"*...shut up...*" Naruto grumbled, drinking the soup and hunching his shoulders sulkily.

Resisting the desire to snicker, the Jounin smiled in high amusement and held out the rest of his dinner.

"*What, all of it?*" Naruto asked, trading the empty bowl for the plate of food.

"*You need it more than I do, you've dropped weight. What the heck have you been doing, anyway?*" Kakashi scowled.

"*I've been eating like a girl,*" he countered dryly, tucking into the food with relish.

"*Touché,*" Kakashi said as he lifted his eyebrows, then flicked an annoyed glance at the door. *"Your little friend is back. This might be the best time to leave, can you stand up?"*

"*Yeah, I'm alright,*" Naruto nodded, handing the plate back and quickly wiping his face with the folded towel before also giving that to the Jounin. He got swiftly to his feet and immediately teetered a bit on legs that weren't quite as prepared as he had assumed.

"*Be careful!*" He hissed, reflexively darting his hands out from where he knelt and gripping Naruto's waist to keep him steady. Again there was the troubling sensation of knowing that waistline had shrunk a bit. Not enough to cause serious worry, but still...

"*Ah, sorry,*" Naruto smiled sheepishly, his cheeks flushing as he grabbed Kakashi's arms to catch his balance. Kakashi released his hands, keeping his arms out for the blonde to brace against till he had his legs firmly under him. *"Okay, I got it this time,"* he said, carefully letting go of the Jounin and shifting from foot to foot to test his balance.

Kakashi hovered his hands near Naruto's waist for a few seconds until he was satisfied the blonde wouldn't topple over. He passed off the twinge of reluctance he felt as nothing but concern when he drew his arms back to his sides. The truth was he did feel anxious about sending Naruto out the door so soon after such an ordeal. Naruto caught Kakashi's eye and grinned confidently, forming the seal to transform before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

"Your color is looking better, Nina-chan," Kakashi said, scooting back to his original position at the table and quickly shoving the towels out of sight. "Have you recovered your senses?" He asked, sliding the teapot to block the view of the empty plate from the doorway.

"I think I have." She gave an embarrassed laugh, impatiently waving off the last of the wisping curls of smoke as she stepped toward the door. "I really don't deserve such kind tolerance, thank you so much, Kyou-san."

Right on cue there was a polite scratch at the door. "Forgive the intrusion, but I wanted to check on Nina-chan," Maia's voice called with discreet softness.

"Come in," Kakashi chuckled mildly as the door slid open and the brunette nearly pounced on Naruto with sweet concern. "See that she's bundled off to bed right away. A hot meal and a good night's rest should have her back to her impertinent self in the morning," he said, waving the pair off with droll amusement.

He resisted the intense desire to roll his eyes at their profuse thanks and apologies. As soon as the door was closed, he flopped lifelessly to the floor and heaved a sigh of relief. Maia had adopted an air of 'mother hen' when she'd heard Kakashi's recommendation, looping her arm around the taller blonde's waist. Naruto would indeed be put to bed right away, and probably be given a treat for his dinner.

Rage started picking at him as he thought about how that kind young lady was being so heartlessly tricked by Masato. From the way Maia had reacted in the garden, it was obvious she had been taken in by the mercenary's act and was delighted at the prospect for her blonde companion. If Naruto hadn't been there, it might have been Maia getting the attention. Though, with familial ties to the ryokan that possibility was a slender one. She was being groomed to stay and marry, not marry and leave.

Kakashi sat up, unfolding the damp towel and wrapping it securely around the mostly dry one to conceal the evidence and distract himself from his thoughts. He paused as he tied the corners together, rubbing the cloth between his fingers thoughtfully as something nagged at him. He'd had to unfold the damp towel. He'd had to unfold it because Naruto had folded it and set it aside. *Naruto had folded the towel without even thinking about it.* The memory stunned him, and he shook his head with a subtle smile as he stuffed the whole bundle into the bottom of the hamper in the corner. The blonde was growing up rapidly, indeed...although that little habit was likely due to his stay here and the necessity of not being caught out as a slob.

After placing his tray of empty dishes in the hall, he pulled out his futon and lay back on it with his hands laced behind his head. The scent of windswept grass and sunlight was heavy in the room, and Kakashi didn't mind that it helped relax him. He hadn't slept much the night before, and he needed to be completely refreshed the next morning because he doubted he'd have much opportunity to really rest over the next several days. That warm smell was so ingrained in his mind he could probably catch it if it was buried within a crowd of thousands of people. He could find it anywhere.

Kakashi awoke an hour before dawn, choking on words half-uttered and clawing at the futon as he doubled over in a frantic attempt to prevent his body's apparent need to completely destroy his mind. He bit into his lower lip and buried his face in his hands as he dug his nails into his scalp, squeezing his eyes shut as he willed himself into submission. After several long minutes he lay half-curled on his side, panting in the cool morning air. ...fuck you, body, I win this time... He grimaced as the agony hit him, rolling onto his knees and pressing his forehead into the tatami mats. ...that's right, let that be a lesson to you...don't you ever do that shit again...

It was several more minutes till he pushed himself to his feet to pace around the room. Well, 'hobble' would be a more appropriate term considering the amount of torture he was in at the

moment. That dream hadn't been the same one as before. What the hell was *wrong* with him?! How could he even think of Naruto like-

The cold knot in his stomach started to warm up and he clenched his fists at his sides, refusing to allow his hideous body to betray him again as he cringed in pain. He grit his teeth and made himself continue to pace furiously until his stride showed no indication of his unrelenting physical ailment. Okay, so it wasn't the first time his sleeping brain had decided to stray into unwanted territory by dreaming of a man, but it was the first time he hadn't been able to shake the aberrant lust off by facing real reality as opposed to dream reality. It wasn't going away. *Why wasn't it going away?!*

He had to back up, he had to go back to the way he used to look at the blonde. He could not continue on like this, it was getting repulsive. Naruto was his *student*, god damn it! His *friend!* His *co-worker!* His *companion!His future* ***boss****, for fuck's sake!* There was no way he was going to let his body twist the feelings he had for Naruto into something that would take the young man away from him! He wouldn't let it! He had to go back!

"*Think, you stupid fuck!"* Kakashi snarled quietly at himself, pulling at his hair. *"Now is not the time to be distracted by this kind of bullshit! It was just a dream! You have to act like nothing happened! Because that will never happen!* ***Because that is not something you have ever, or will ever WANT to happen!"***

If he didn't get himself together fast there was more to be lost than his mind. He was on a mission, and a dangerous one at that. He had to focus! It was a safe bet that Masato would take Naruto today, he couldn't afford to get rattled by a personal bout of insanity. Unfortunately, scrolling through the interactions between Naruto and Masato wasn't helping to center his concentration, it was making his blood boil.

Stalking to the door that led outside to the porch, he forced himself to slide it gently open instead of kicking it down like he wanted to. He needed air, this was just plain getting out of hand. An all too familiar scent crept in on the fresh breeze, and he caught sight of a lithe figure walking quickly to the small shed that housed the ryokan's washing machine. Stepping back from the door, he turned and slid down the wall so he could sit and glare daggers at the wall.

...seriously, Fate...you can be a fucking bitch at the worst times...

Acting like nothing happened was going to be excruciating in more ways than one that day.

The Writing on the Wall

Chapter Notes

This is actually the first half of one chapter that I broke into two, hence the somewhat abrupt ending. I did that because things are going to get a bit darker in the next book, and I wanted to give people the option of skipping over the more intense stuff that will be coming up. I'll put a more detailed warning up there as well.

For anyone who's curious, the original title for the combined chapters was 'Mine'. But that's hard to split in half...so I came up with two new titles. =P

The Writing on the Wall

Naruto awoke with a gasp of pain, blinking away the dangerously vivid dream and snatching his hand back from where his angry little messenger toad had stabbed him with his hair pick. He was covered in sweat and breathing heavily, wanting nothing more than to get out from under the blanket he was hiding beneath. A mumbling snort a few feet away had him holding his breath painfully while his heart pounded in his ears.

When the snoring resumed a somewhat steady rhythm, he transformed quickly and darted out to the washroom down the hall. He knelt on the cold tile floor and rested his bandaged forehead against the wall. He wished the wound hadn't already healed, because now the only discomfort he had left to focus on was the infuriating result of a dream *that should never have occurred within his head! EVER!*

My, my, aren't we up early today... Kurama drawled, opening one eye with a wicked gleam. *So? Who'd you dream about?*

Naruto's focus internalized, and he snapped his eyes open within his subconscious. Thank goodness he was male and dressed in his normal clothes while he was in the large room, otherwise conversing with Kurama would have been intolerable. He whirled on the fox in enraged embarrassment and total dumbfounded shock. Kurama had never once teased him after one of his...imaginative...dreams. Mainly because he was never awake to do it, but still!

What the hell are you doing awake?!

I'm supposed to be awake while you're on this mission to keep an eye on you, dumbass... Kurama grinned and flicked the ends of his tails like a cat. *Want me to take care of your little problem for you?*

WHAT?! *Absolutely not! Just leave me alone!*

It's better than a cold shower.

Piss off! This is my problem, and I'll deal with it!

That genjutsu was supposed to make you dream about Masato.

Naruto abruptly felt very cold...and a little like he wanted to vomit. *...problem solved...* He said quietly, his shoulders dropping in horror. *Why didn't you tell me last night?*

*Because that's all you'd have thought about, and then you **would** have dreamt about him,* Kurama replied, glancing at the wall and pinning his ears briefly in agitation. *He'll probably take you today, now that he's got you ripe for a longer genjutsu after getting your feathers so ruffled. He's been sniffing at your skirt long enough for no one to be surprised if you left with him. You should scrub off that crystal and pocket it, he'll notice if you don't have it with you. Oi, you listening?*

Yeah, I heard you, Naruto said softly, scratching his arm and standing up as a nervous chill ran down his spine. *This is what I'm here for, after all.*

Oh? This is rare. Kurama crouched forward and bumped his nose against Naruto's chest. *Is the kit scared?* He needled with a patronizing chuckle.

A little, Naruto replied somberly, pushing the fox's nose away without the usual energy.

Kurama's eyes widened in genuine surprise, then narrowed to angry slits. He snorted forcefully, the puff of air sending the blonde skidding across the floor.

What the heck was that?! Naruto demanded, sitting up and glaring at the fox.

That's what I'd like to know! Kurama snapped, flashing his canines. *Fucking hell, you've been a girl so long you've actually turned into a pussy! You really think these guys can take you down?!*

That's not what scares me, damn it! Naruto shouted, jumping to his feet. *One kunoichi is already dead because of these assholes, and if I screw it up somehow then more are going to die! More girls are going to be taken like I will be! It's not enough to survive, I have to succeed and complete the mission! If it was just a fight it'd be a piece of cake, but it's not that easy this time!*

*Then man up and get it done! Shit, **woman** up and get it done! Why do you think the Hokage let you go on this assignment?! She believes you can do it! Kakashi actually managed to make it here in time and he hasn't sent you packing, so he believes you can do it! Hell, even **I** believe you can do it!* Kurama snarled and pinned Naruto down with one paw, his claws digging into the floor around the blond. ***Why the fuck isn't that enough for you?!***

It should be, Naruto said, looking fearlessly up into the fox's blazing eyes as his resolve started to burn in his chest.

You're damn right it should, Kurama growled.

Then I guess it is, Naruto grinned wolfishly, orange shadows flashing around eyes turned gold as he kicked Kurama's hand away.

Welcome back, brat, Kurama chuckled, shaking his paw out before clenching it into a fist and holding it toward Naruto. *I wondered where you'd gone off to for a minute there.*

Not far, Naruto laughed, tapping his knuckles against the giant fist.

Naruto opened his eyes and stared at the wall he was still leaning against, flicking out his senses to survey the area before letting Sennin Mode drop. Everyone was still in their rooms, probably asleep. Taking a deep breath, he slammed his forehead against the wall so he'd at least have a bruise to sport. The grey pre-dawn light filtered through the hallway as he walked back to his shared room. The older woman had fallen back into a deep sleep, and he grabbed his things quietly before scurrying back to the washroom for a much-needed shower.

He dropped his transformation and kept the water cold as a precautionary measure, swiftly washing the sweat away. It was a risk to leave himself exposed, but for once he'd gotten up early enough to allow himself that small luxury. Scrubbing down with the towel, he transformed again before struggling into his clothes. Tying the obi was an acrobatic feat, and he knew it wasn't as nice as when he had someone help him.

Tiptoeing back into his room he quietly rifled through his few belongings. He taped a large band-aid over the fresh bruise on his forehead, and then pocketed the wrapped crystal that had caused so much trouble the previous day. Figuring out his hair took a minute, but he managed to sweep a lock of it over the band-aid to hide it a bit. His fingers tightened around the roll of bandages Kakashi had given him last night, and on impulse he tucked the small book of haiku under the back of his obi.

It was too early for him to be up, but he knew he could use the excuse of self-induced penance for getting off work early the night before. He took a deep breath of fresh morning air as he jogged to the small shack that housed the ancient washing machine. The contraption was loud and annoying, but it was better than doing laundry by hand. Thank goodness he had been tasked with doing laundry that morning, it gave him the much-needed opportunity to sit by himself and think without anyone wondering about his sudden desire for solitude.

As Naruto filled the machine with sheets and towels, he wished he could have snuck to Kakashi's room and retrieved the towels from last night. It wouldn't make any difference if someone found them after today, but he would have preferred to clean up his own mess. Dumping in the right amount of detergent and twisting the knob, he gave the rumbling banging machine a sour look before walking to the sink nearby.

Careful not to actually touch the crystal at first, he rinsed and scrubbed it clean. Rage, embarrassment, humiliation, disgust, confusion. The maelstrom of emotions swirled around in him with no discernible winner. Confusion was the unexpected dark horse, and he knew that was the one he needed to face because it was the one he cringed from. He looked at his fingers under the running tap water, sliding his thumb over the spot where there had been a shallow cut.

Guilt made an abrupt appearance, twisting everything into a tangled mess and ending the race for which emotion would come out on top. He closed his eyes and splashed water over his face, turning off the tap as he pocketed the crystal and rubbed the back of his neck with a wet hand. That stupid dream was going to haunt him. Spitting out a curse as he felt his cheeks and belly heat up just thinking about it, he stomped over to the bench next to the window that faced out into the wooded area behind the inn.

Naruto sat down and glared at the shadowed forest, dangling his arm out the window and resting his chin on the smooth pine frame. How could he have had a dream about Kakashi?! *Kakashi,* of all people?! He was a *man!* A few seconds passed as he let that notion sink in. Damn it! It wasn't as off-putting as he had hoped it would be. Why wasn't he freaking out like he used to?! What the hell was *wrong* with him?!

The idea still made him mentally jump back, but it didn't send him running for the hills. It was like everything was getting all snarled up in weird conflicting definitions, and he didn't understand what anything meant anymore. He loved being in Kakashi's company, that was a given. Hell, it had been that way for years, there was nothing new about it. Over the last few months it had felt like he'd gotten a little bit closer and been able to peek behind the wall the Jounin always had around him. Just thinking about it gave him a greedy feeling in the center of his chest. He really was too nosy for his own good, he wanted to see more.

His mind strayed back to the dream and he buried his warm face in his arm. But not *that* much more! Crap! It didn't help that he knew his dream had been very accurate about all the details, because he'd seen Kakashi naked enough times at the Konoha hot springs. NOT THAT HE HAD EVER STARED AT ANYTHING BUT THE MAN'S FACE! FUCK! You look people in the *eyes* when you were in the springs.

And there it was; that burning memory of seeing the ravenous fire in the one dark eye, setting his face ablaze and making his body go rigid with something very akin to panic. Right. Time to try a different tactic. It was like having a dream about...about...

He scowled, trying to pinpoint an accurate descriptor and unable to settle on just one. Family? Teacher? Superior? Friend? Okay, yes, it felt like Kakashi was family, but they weren't related so that didn't have the right sort of impact to derail his unhealthy thoughts. 'Teacher' also didn't hold the proper deterrent now that he was getting older, and 'superior' was edging into the same category. The age gap was closing, and he'd always been too irreverent to let something like respect stop him from speaking his mind or letting his heart feel what it wanted to.

'Friend'? That one hurt. Naruto winced at the tight grip of invisible fists in his chest. That one really hurt a lot! If Kakashi ever found out what he was thinking Naruto might lose him forever. He gasped, pulling away from the window and clutching the front of his kimono as his lungs constricted. He'd never be able to get close to the Jounin again, even if he was standing a foot away. Never laugh together, tease each other, lean on, learn from, talk, listen, trust, smile, play, argue! The thought was unbearable!

Fighting for air, he forced himself to take deep breaths as specks of light danced in front of his eyes. He was going to have to find a way to erase all those dangerous thoughts, but until then Kakashi could never *ever* find out about them! The washing machine ground to a halt

with a clatter, and Naruto lurched onto shaky legs to empty then reload it. Scooping up the basket of damp linen, he made his way to the drying lines on the wrap-around porch. He couldn't keep himself from feeling, but he could at least busy himself enough to keep from dwelling on it. He'd work it out when he got home. Now was not the time to be distracted, he had to focus and pretend nothing had happened last night.

Masato slithered up to him as he straightened out the third load of laundry along the line. Naruto had spent his whole life tumbling in a vat of raw emotions, never bothering to hide them, always letting them blaze out of him. With the concentration his transformation afforded, he could draw upon all those emotions at will and set them loose. So, as much as he despised the man sneaking up behind him to surprise him with a 'good morning', he knew he could respond exactly how Masato wanted him to.

"Good morning, Nina-chan," Masato sang softly.

Naruto gave a little squeak and jumped as he turned around, placing his hand over his chest.

*By the way, Little Freesia, who **did** you dream about?* Kurama asked impishly.

"Ah, Masato-san, you scared me," he giggled, ducking his head as his cheeks warmed up.

I dreamt about 'none of your fucking business', and stop calling me that stupid name!

Made you blush, didn't I? The fox grinned remorselessly. *This is going to be delightfully easy today, isn't it.*

Shut up...

"Oh, sorry, sorry," Masato said, bowing slightly before holding out a cup of steaming tea with a concerned searching expression. "I heard you'd had an accident last night, and I thought perhaps I should bring you a cup of tea. You really shouldn't be out here if you're not feeling well, Nina-chan."

"Masato-san is far too sweet to me," Naruto said shyly, reaching out for the cup and letting his fingers relax against the brush of the man's hand as Masato relinquished the cup.

"I can't help it," Masato chuckled quietly, seeming to be highly pleased with whatever he'd been searching for in her eyes. He leaned in slightly with a well-calculated expression of kindness and subtle desire. "Being with you is like being in a dream."

Now that I think about it, I seem to recall you mumbling someone's name last night... Kurama said thoughtfully, scratching his chin and flicking his tails.

Naruto's eyes widened involuntarily as his face turned bright red, and he clutched the ceramic cup tight while his entire body tensed.

Don't you dare! Naruto snapped.

"You shouldn't say such things to a person like me," he gasped, darting his eyes away and biting his lip as he pressed one hand to his cheek.

"I told you I can't help it," Masato smiled somewhat victoriously, pulling her hand from her cheek and brushing his lips over her knuckles. "Your beautiful eyes have bewitched me."

"We'll be seen," Naruto said nervously, not putting any real effort into trying to pull his hand away and knowing full well that Maia was hiding behind the corner listening to everything with baited breath. That damn girl had probably helped Masato set this whole situation up.

"I want to be seen with you. I want you to come with me," Masato said, cupping her hand in both of his.

"I...I don't know..." Naruto said haltingly, letting his expression get conflicted as he deliberately dredged up his warring emotions over his dream.

"My business in the Land of Earth is going well," he said, taking his hands off of hers with a show of great reluctance. "It may finish soon, and I would love to be able to show you the crystal mine before my employer sends me to another location."

"I would love to see it," Naruto said shyly, taking a sip of the tea – as he was expected to – and resisting the urge to grimace at the subtly salty aftertaste. Damn it, he wished he wasn't so hungry. Whatever was in the tea was probably going to hit him hard, the same way that crap yesterday had.

"Let me show it to you. Just think about it, Nina-chan," Masato smiled with entreaty.

"I...I'll think about it," Naruto replied, ducking his head with a meekly flattered smile and taking another small drink of the drug-laced tea to hide his embarrassment.

His head was starting to feel a little fluffy inside, so it was painfully easy to pull off the act. It wasn't the same feeling as yesterday, though, so that was a good thing. There was a polite cough from the doorway into the ryokan, and Naruto almost dropped the cup as he genuinely jumped in surprise. Shit, he was losing his focus! Kakashi better order his damn breakfast quick. He felt his cheeks heat up again, and inwardly cursed up a storm at his stupid reaction to the idea of seeing the Jounin. SHIT!

Oooh, I didn't even have to say anything that time, Kurama laughed wickedly.

*Shut **up** !*

"Ah, I'm so sorry Masato-san, but Nina-chan is needed in the kitchen," Maia said with a little bow. The petite brunette shuffled over to Naruto and shooed the blonde away from the laundry with a surreptitious wink. "I'll finish this, don't worry."

...THANK YOU, GOD... "Oh, thank you, Maia-san," Naruto said, flicking his eyes away from the wink as his cheeks continued to burn and a somewhat giddy smile pulled at his lips without his permission. "Forgive me, Masato-san, but I really must go," he bowed to the dark-haired man and scampered off.

The short journey to the kitchen was practically an adventure, and he was feeling way too happy about it. Everyone complimented him on how cheerful he was, and how radiant he

looked, and he simply giggled and lapped it all up. The remaining tea was dumped into the sink as soon as he reached the kitchen. Walking down the hall with the tray of breakfast, he idly wondered if this was what it felt like to be a little drunk.

"I've brought your meal, Kyou-san," Naruto sang, kneeling at the sliding door with the tray next to him on the floor.

"Come in," Kakashi replied after a brief pause, his voice almost pitched up as a question.

"Sorry for the intrusion," Naruto said, picking up the tray and walking into the room. It was like stepping into a glorious sanctuary. It was safe there. Kakashi would fix everything. "Ah, you're reading about animals again?" He asked, setting the tray down and moving the warm dishes to the table top while humming absently.

"I am," Kakashi nodded placidly, closing his book slowly and setting it aside. "You seem to be in much better spirits this morning. How's your head?"

"Eh?" Naruto blinked, sliding the empty tray to the floor before brushing his fingers up to his forehead. "Oh, it feels much better now. Just a little ache, is all."

"Let me see it," Kakashi sighed, reaching out to peel half the bandage away.

"I can't stop being an annoyance for Kyou-san, can I," he said meekly. Kakashi's fingers were gentle and cool to the touch. It felt kind of nice. "I brought your bandages back," he said quickly, halting his drifting thoughts and fishing the roll of cloth out of his pocket.

"That wasn't necessary, but thank you," Kakashi said scratching his thumbnail over the bruise.

Naruto didn't flinch, instead watching as the Jounin slipped an inscribed bit of paper from his sleeve to wipe the shallow cut before palming it into his sleeve again. He'd used one similar to it last night, and Naruto wondered what it was. It occurred to him that Kakashi wasn't whispering anything to him, and he thought perhaps he should say something. He couldn't really think of anything to say, though...

"That little scratch you got was deeper than I thought," Kakashi mused absently, turning and rummaging through his backpack for a moment. "I should give you some ointment. This will sting a bit," he said, setting a small jar down on the table and opening the lid. *"Say 'ah',"* he said under his breath.

"Wha—mmf!" Naruto didn't have time to process what happened till it was over, and he still took several seconds to figure it out as he licked his lips and swallowed furiously against the sour taste on his tongue. His slightly muzzy brain was having a hard time accepting the notion that Kakashi had just stuck his finger in his mouth. He was also having an extremely difficult time trying to decide if it had been a good thing, or a bad thing.

"Sorry, it shouldn't last long," Kakashi said, smearing a dab of soothing ointment over the injury.

"It's all right," Naruto replied with an embarrassed laugh as the sour taste started fading along with the cotton in his head. He could feel his ears sizzling, and had to viciously restrain himself from jerking out of reach of Kakashi's hands. HOLY SHIT, IT HAD BEEN A BAD THING WHETHER HE LIKED IT OR NOT! "*Was that really necessary?! You couldn't have put that nasty stuff on a spoon, or something?!*"

"All fixed," Kakashi said, smoothing the band-aid securely back into place and putting the first aid supplies away. *"Not with the door wide open,"* he whispered pleasantly, his eye not meeting Naruto's. *"Did he use a genjutsu this time?"*

"Thank you, Kyou-san," Naruto said, shaking his head at the question and suddenly realizing Kakashi hadn't looked him right in the eyes at all yet. The first icy stirrings of panic bit into his nerves. Deftly plucking the book from where it rested against the small of his back, he slid it under the table. *"I finished memorizing it, so don't pretend to forget our deal."* ...why won't you look at me?!...

"You're welcome," Kakashi replied, still not looking the blonde in the eyes. *"I won't,"* he said, his fingertips a hair's breadth away from Naruto's as he put his hand on the book.

Naruto felt the book slip out from under his touch, and he suddenly wanted nothing more than to reach forward and grab onto that hand beneath the table. To grab on and never let go, to beg his forgiveness, to bait him into a fight, to do something – *anything* – to get Kakashi to look him in the damn eyes! ...please, I can't lose you...you can't possibly know...you have to look at me and promise you'll find me!...

"*I'll be waiting,"* Naruto said quietly, standing up and desperately wishing he could come up with a way to keep the conversation going.

Kakashi finally lifted his gaze, and Naruto felt the hair on his arms stand up as his eyes widened a bit. There was an unwavering steel in the Jounin's eye, like the sharp glint of an edged weapon in the dark. No...it was more like fangs.

"*I promise, I'll find you."*

"Enjoy your meal, Kyou-san," Naruto smiled as he turned to walk to the door, letting the warm glow seeping into his bones radiate out of him in place of the artificial happiness from earlier.

Kakashi would find him no matter where he was, and they would both return to the village with a successful mission behind them. That fact was as indisputable as the flow of the tides. He could face anything as long as he knew the Jounin would be out there hunting him down. He slid the door closed behind him, then walked back to the kitchen with a slight spring in his step. There were other meals to deliver.

It only took an hour for Masato to order his meal, and word of his proposal had spread through the gossip chain of the ryokan staff like wildfire on a windy day. Naruto maintained his giddy secretive smile easily under the curious gazes that followed him. Even the rigidly formal hostess gave him a nod of approval as he passed her in the hallway on his way to deliver Masato's breakfast. Deep inside it sickened him that these people were being tricked

so ruthlessly, but that didn't affect his smile. He was going to make sure this never happened again.

"I've brought your meal, Masato-san," he said with shy delight.

"Ah, come in, come in, Nina-chan," Masato replied happily.

I'll tell you a secret, Kurama's voice rumbled quietly, without the usual wicked humor.

"Sorry for the intrusion," Naruto said, sliding the door open and stepping inside to kneel at the low table after a carefully startled look around the room. "Masato-san is leaving right away?" The disappointment in his voice was real. He'd be leaving Kakashi behind soon.

Stop it... Naruto hissed, knowing the fox wouldn't and hating the fact that he needed Kurama to bait him like this.

"I'm afraid so," Masato sighed, idly sliding his finger around the rim of his tea cup.

You never mumbled anyone's name last night.

"When will you be back?" Naruto asked, casting his sad eyes down after setting the empty tray aside. He twined his fingers tightly in the cloth of his kimono as he felt his cheeks start to warm up. He had to let go, just this once.

"I may not be back." Masato paused briefly, and cupped her chin in his hand. "Come with me, Nina-chan."

You never got the chance because the toad woke you up.

"I..." Naruto felt his pulse quicken, and he closed his eyes as Masato started to lean forward. He had to let go of everything and pretend he was asleep, just for a moment.

I'll tell you what you did say, though.

"Come with me." Masato's voice was soft and pleading a few inches from the blonde, but Naruto wasn't listening to him.

You said: 'Please...don't stop...'

Naruto's breath hitched in a quiet gasp of vivid recollection, his body involuntarily leaning subtly forward. ...Kakashi...

"Ah, excuse me," Kakashi's voice said somewhat dryly from the doorway.

Naruto's self-induced illusion was shattered into a million tiny horrified little pieces, and he slapped his hands over his mouth as he whirled around to look up at the focus of the aforementioned illusion. Humiliation, fury and relief threatened to overwhelm him, and he swiftly covered his face to turn away and watch from the corner of his eye. The fact that he really wanted to jump up and kiss Kakashi for rescuing him like that was not helping his

situation, either. Masato was quickly collecting himself as he straightened back up, looking none too pleased about being interrupted.

"Was there something you needed?" Masato asked curtly.

"Not really," Kakashi shrugged, nonplussed as he held out the crystal Masato had given Naruto yesterday. "I found this outside your door."

"That's mine!" Naruto gasped in genuine surprise, clutching at the pocket it was supposed to be in and jumping to his feet. Even though he'd washed it carefully, the idea of Kakashi touching that horrible crystal was almost sickening.

Kakashi pinched it when he stuck his finger in your mouth, Kurama grinned and cackled. *The guy has impeccable timing, you should thank him properly one of these days.*

*Shut up! Shit, and he calls **me** reckless?! What the hell was he thinking?!*

"Thank you for taking the trouble to pick it up," Masato said neutrally as he walked to the door and took the offered crystal.

Naruto had to truly fight the desire to snatch it out of Masato's hands when the man turned and held it out. He wrapped his fingers tightly around it, wishing he could simply tackle Kakashi so he could scrub the Jounin's hands clean. Masato cupped his hands around Naruto's, sliding his thumb across the back of his hand. He abruptly wished he could also scrub his own hands clean...

I bet he was thinking he'd let you stick your finger in his mouth if you asked him nicely, Kurama leered.

OH MY GOD, SHUT THE FUCK UP!

"Y-yes, thank you. It's...it's something very important to me," Naruto said as his face caught fire.

While Masato had his back to Kakashi, the Jounin caught Naruto's eye and gave him an intense questioning look with a subtle lift of his shoulders. The expression cleared to mild politeness as Masato let go and turned around to face Kakashi again. He was standing a bit in front of Naruto, a gesture the blonde recognized as an act of possession. It made him bristle inside, but he suppressed it and shook his head almost imperceptibly as he flicked one finger in a little circle pointing toward his stomach.

"Then I'm glad to have been able to return it," Kakashi said amiably. "My apologies for interrupting," he bowed slightly and walked away.

"My little gift means that much to you?" Masato asked quietly, his voice lilting slightly with hope as he kept his back to her.

"It does, Masato-san," he replied, the hair on the back of his neck standing up at the sensation of Masato molding chakra. Naruto could see the muscles in the man's shoulders twitch as he

formed seals out of his line of sight, and he split his focus between his internal world and the external one.

"Then come with me, Nina-chan," Masato said, turning around to slide his fingertips across her forehead and down her jaw line.

Naruto unfocused his eyes as Kurama wrapped a few of his tails around him, and he was vaguely aware of the invasive genjutsu chakra skittering across his nerves within the soft cloud of red fur. The fox swept it away easily, scowling thoughtfully as he unwound his tails from around Naruto.

Just agree to whatever he says and act a little dreamy, similar to how that stuff he put in the tea made you act, Kurama said. *There wasn't much to it, he probably thinks he's got you in the bag already.*

He better with the 12 circles of Hell I've had to endure... Naruto grumbled, shooting a dirty look toward the amused and chuckling fox.

So, would that make Kakashi your guardian angel, or the succubus you met along the way? Kurama smirked.

"Of course I will..." Naruto said somewhat dazedly, blinking and looking down at the crystal in his hands as his treacherous face warmed up for the millionth time that day. "Of course I will, Masato-san," he repeated, looking up with a giddy giggle as if just saying the words was the best thing ever.

I swear to god, Kurama, I am going to curb-stomp the shit out of you when this is all over.

"You have no idea how happy you've made me," Masato said, brushing the backs of his fingers against her cheek and smiling as if he'd just won himself a solid gold statue. "I have to leave before midday, so you should hurry and take care of anything you need to."

Aww, how sweet. We haven't played tug-of-war in a long time, I'm looking forward to it, the fox laughed.

"I will," Naruto nodded, walking to the door and then turning to beam at Masato. He'd actually done it! He was inches away from succeeding at this damn mission! "I am leaving with Masato-san!"

He slid the door closed and quickly walked to his room, careful to keep that goofy smile on his face while his insides began to knot up with adrenaline. Packing took no time at all, he had precious little with him aside from a few changes of clothes. Settling his account with the hostess and making all the proper good-bye's to the staff was what took the longest. It was nearly midday by the time he was walking out the front door in his nondescript traveling clothes.

It was less than three hours later when Masato hit him with a sleeping genjutsu. Kurama was quick to snake his tails around Naruto within his subconscious, and Naruto obligingly passed out in Masato's arms. The fox didn't release him right away, even though he'd brushed off the

genjutsu. Naruto waited for a few minutes as his limp body was unceremoniously slung over Masato's shoulder before the man trotted off the road and into the trees.

Oi, what gives? Naruto asked, pulling lightly on a tuft of the soft red walls surrounding him.

Suppress your chakra and put as much of your focus in here as you can, Kurama replied slowly. *No matter what happens, you can't let your physical body react. I'll help you out, but I can't take you over completely or they'll notice the change.*

Why? What are they going to do? Hey!

Shut up and stay still! Kurama snarled, constricting his tails and drowning Naruto in a sea of red fur.

Naruto gave muffled yell of protest as the fox started to forcibly mute his sense of connection between his subconscious and conscious body, but stopped struggling as he felt a subtle vibration against his body. It steadily intensified, and he realized Kurama was growling. Startled at the amount of aggression in the sound, he closed his eyes and concentrated on dimming his chakra as far as he could without losing the transformation. All that practicing with the card trick was coming in handy.

"So, how'd she taste?" A raspy voice asked from nearby.

Naruto was aware of Masato coming to a halt at the sound of the voice. It was bizarre being walled off from his own body. It was as if he was standing a few feet back from himself, able to feel but unable to react.

"Some one-eyed gimp got in the way," Masato replied, spitting in contempt. "Fuck, I hate ryokans! It's like a nesting site for cock-blockers."

Naruto felt hands slide up the backs of his calves, and he wriggled furiously against the tight hold Kurama had on him.

"God, I had her, too," Masato continued in angry frustration. "She was right fucking there! I could have had the door shut and been balls-deep in her mouth in three seconds! I should go back and slit that asshole's throat!"

Stop struggling, god damn it! The fox snapped. *If they see you start to twitch they might drug you, and then it's all over!*

Naruto huffed air through his nose in a frantic attempt to keep himself from throwing up, gritting his teeth and closing his eyes as the fingers moved along his thighs. The groping examination continued up his back, around his waist, across his chest, and finally ended with his chin being lifted for a moment while his small injury was inspected.

"What's with the lump on her head?" The raspy voice growled.

"She's a clutz," Masato shrugged. "Don't even give me that look you ugly fucker! Her legs are tied together at the knees, she's still intact."

Indignant rage boiled up in Naruto as his face was let go and his ass was given a hearty slap.

"Let's go," the raspy voice said.

Naruto could feel his arms swing loosely as Masato started to jog again, and Kurama released his tails enough to form a little spiraled cage. It had the effect of keeping a slight buffer between his mind and his body.

*I hope you **do** go after Kakashi!* Naruto shouted wrathfully, fists clenched and shoulders hunched as he stood there within the confines of his personal Biju cage. *I hope you **both** run into him, **BECAUSE YOU'RE THE ONES WHO WILL BE TORN TO PIECES YOU SICK TWISTED FUCKS!***

Feel better? Kurama asked with a flick of his ears, his tone only slightly dry as his rumbling growl started to ease back but not fade completely.

NO! Naruto yelled, sitting down furiously.

Kurama stretched out like a cat, settling down to rest his chin on his folded paws next to the blonde as he stared at the wall ahead of him. It took quite a while for Naruto to cool his temper and settle his rebellious stomach. He slumped back against one of the furry bars spiraled around him, and tilted his head to look around at the bare walls. It was all familiar since he'd been there on countless occasions, but he'd never been trapped there before. Not that he couldn't get out if he wanted to.

It's really empty in here, isn't it, Naruto said thoughtfully.

It's the inside of your head, of course it is, Kurama said drolly,rolling his eyes and turning to look at Naruto.

Ha ha, very funny, he retorted sarcastically. *Come on, I'm being serious. There's nothing in here at all.*

I know. I was being serious, too.

I wonder if I could put a TV in here... Naruto continued, ignoring the jibe.

Excuse me?! Kurama lifted his head and scowled at Naruto in disbelief.

Or maybe a couch and a table.

Where the hell do you think you are?! This is a seal, not an apartment!

But it's still in my subconscious, right? Naruto tapped a finger against his temple, looking up at the disgusted fox. *That means I should be able to change it however I want. Here, I'll try to p-*

Don't you dare, Kurama interrupted flatly, constricting the tails surrounding the blonde. *Disregarding the fact that you screwing around with the structure of your subconscious mind while you're transformed and pretending to be unconscious is about the dumbest thing you*

could possibly do, he continued waspishly, unwrapping his tails to form the cage again. *I do not **want** anything changed in here!*

Why not? Naruto asked curiously, looking up from where he lay on his back and completely unfazed by the rough treatment. *Don't you get bored in here?*

That's why I sleep... the fox said caustically. *Besides, if I feel the need to be entertained, I just have to open my eyes. You make a fool of yourself on an hourly basis, so I usually don't have to wait long for a good laugh.*

I do not!

Kurama flicked his ear and lifted an eyebrow pointedly.

...not hourly... Naruto grumbled, pushing himself up to lean back on his elbows. He sighed and let his gaze drift over the walls. *You really don't want anything in here?*

It's fine the way it is.

I should let you out more.

I doubt the landscape would appreciate that.

No, I mean switch places, Naruto said, sitting up and waving his finger between them. *You could go out and make some friends, or something.*

There was a long moment of silence as the fox looked at Naruto as if he'd sprouted something semi-repulsive from the top of his head. *Did you seriously just say that...?*

Well, yeah. Don't you get a little lonely in here?

*I live **inside** you,* Kurama said slowly and carefully, as if explaining something complex to an irritating child. *I do not **get** lonely because I am never **alone**.*

Naruto mulled over that for a minute. *You won't be inside me forever, though.*

Can you please stop talking, now...

How about some paintings on the walls? I bet I could even pull off some nice calligraphy if I used a reference from Sai.

Guess what? Kurama asked, smiling excitedly.

What? Naruto replied, perking up.

It's time for you to shut the fuck up! Kurama said furiously, burying the blonde under the ends of his tails.

It was a long while before the fox lifted his tails to form the spiral cage again. Naruto laced his fingers behind his head where he lay on his back, looking up at the ceiling beyond the

furry red bars. He could feel the chill in the air against his skin, and even though he couldn't open his body's eyes he knew that the sun was setting. The constant soft growl in the background started to get louder after several minutes had passed, and he glanced over as the fur along Kurama's spine began to stand up.

We're getting close, aren't we, he said quietly.

Yeah.

Well, I guess we better get ready, then, Naruto said, getting to his feet as he felt Masato come to a halt.

Stay still this time, Kurama grumbled, wrapping his tails tightly around Naruto.

"We've brought the merchandise, undamaged as requested," the raspy voice said from Naruto's left.

He could hear soft footsteps circling around to where his head lolled against Masato's back, and he closed his eyes within his subconscious as fingers gripped his chin to tilt his face up.

"A lovely piece," a man's voice said before letting go. "Pay them. This one is worth the price."

Naruto felt himself get transferred to another shoulder just before a sharp pain stabbed into his calf. The distance between his subconscious mind and his body quickly widened as his head began to fill with cotton. Kurama's tails dropped as the fox spat out a vicious curse, and Naruto collapsed on top of them as he fought to

keep his transformation from breaking. He was vaguely aware of the sounds of flesh being ripped, and bodies falling to the ground with wet gurgling coughs.

His muscles were going numb and his brain refused to work properly, clouded and muffled behind a screen of fog. The weariness felt like it was coming on too fast for just a drug, and he was forced to push more and more chakra out to maintain his transformation. Realization hit him the same time he heard Kurama echo what he was thinking.

Shit, he's draining your chakra!

Gritting his teeth, Naruto flared his chakra and attempted to struggle in his captor's grasp. It was enough of a distraction to get the man to pause his focus, and he used that moment to fling Kurama back and pin him down with a handful of tori gates. Without the soft tails beneath him, he hit the floor hard on his side.

What the fuck are you doing?! Kurama demanded, scratching at the floor and kicking his hind legs to try to get free of the gates.

He slid his hand to his stomach, never taking his apologetic gaze away from the enraged fox.

Don't! Kurama shouted, his eyes going wide in disbelief.

It's okay, Naruto said softly, turning the seal and locking the gate between them.

"Aren't you a feisty one," the man said, digging his nails into Naruto's leg to resume leeching away the blonde's chakra. "And here I thought this was what you wanted, little shinobi."

Naruto lifted his arm with a great deal of effort inside his subconscious, feeling his world starting to crumble around the edges.

Stop it!

I won't let them find you, Naruto smiled.

YOU IDIO -

Kurama's words were cut off as Naruto dropped four tori gates around himself to seal his chakra away from the fox. He could hear the muffled roaring curses behind the gates, but he couldn't see anything beyond the shadows that surrounded him. His arm dropped lifelessly, and he could no longer feel his own body. Unconsciousness dragged him under like an anchor, and he silently promised Kurama he'd make it up to him somehow.

Pretty Eyes

Chapter Notes

I NEED TO WARN YOU ABOUT THIS CHAPTER because this series is under the 'humor' category...and there is no humor in this chapter. I tried not to be too graphic. I don't like writing gratuitous gore or Spanish Inquisition torture, it's mostly just mind games. However, there will be blood. Some violence. And...um...creepiness. Slight cannibalism. Wait! Don't leave! It's not as horrifying as you think it is! Honestly, it's not all that bad, I don't think. I'm just paranoid.

At any rate, this is technically the second half of the chapter 'The Writing on the Wall'. The original title for both books put together was 'Mine'. I broke it up so anyone who doesn't want to read this kind of thing can just skip to the next book. =)

Pretty Eyes

Reality came back slowly and painfully, dragging Naruto out of his sleep the same way he had been dragged into it. The first thing he was aware of were sounds, muted and overlapping in an odd familiar chaos. It took him a moment to make sense of it, and he realized what he was hearing were voices. Or, at least he thought they were voices. He cracked his eyes open to look at a hazy dark mass he guessed to be a ceiling of some sort, and the noise around him started to coalesce into something he could comprehend.

"...ck up about it, Eito," a man's voice sighed in irritation. "He's waking up, do something."

"Damn, this kid has an ass-load of stamina," Eito grumbled, and Naruto felt a hand grip the top of his head. "I'm gonna be high for fucking *weeks* off of this idiot's chakra."

"Then you'll have enough to send a clone to site five and prep it. The snow should be melted by now."

...snow?... Naruto felt his consciousness wavering as his chakra was drained, and he scratched his fingers weakly on the flat surface he was laying on in frustration. He was vaguely aware of something sliding over his chest in a rhythmic pattern, but he couldn't focus his eyes much less move his head to look at what was going on. He wasn't sure if it was his fading vision or not, but the way the light swayed and flickered off the ceiling gave him the impression of being in a room full of candles. Or maybe he was under water.

"And tell that dumbshit brother of yours to send us supplies while he's in Kōkai," the unnamed voice continued. "I'm getting sick of eating the vermin your dogs bring in."

"Fuck off, Jin! It's better than that shit you br..."

The voices drifted away as the darkness swallowed Naruto yet again.

When he opened his eyes to stare at a dimly lit stone ceiling he had a foul taste in his bone dry mouth, his limbs felt like they were weighted down with lead, and his head was pounding like a taiko drum. Clinking metal grated against stone from his left and he jumped at the sound, struggling to get his body to push him to his elbows and turn to look. What he saw was like something out of a bad horror film.

A filthy ragged-looking man was hunched in the corner, rocking from foot to foot and making the chains that bound his ankles rasp on the stone floor. He was scrawny and wiry, his brown hair matted and dangling around his shoulders. Similar to how Naruto was dressed, all he had on were some tatty trousers. Whatever he was eating was consuming all of his attention, the object gripped tightly in his hands as he buried his face in it and gnawed on it with an unpleasant amount of noise.

Naruto blinked, trying to get his eyes to focus properly as he carefully slid himself to his knees so as not to disturb the stranger. He needed to get his bearings before confronting that...person. His vision cleared after a few seconds, and he suddenly wished it hadn't. Scrambling back in horrified revulsion, he hit the wall behind him and doubled over to vomit in the corner. It was painful, since nothing but bile came up from his empty stomach.

He was coughing and gagging the last of it up when something grabbed his neck and yanked him hard enough to send him skidding across the floor. Long jagged nails dug into his shoulder and scraped deeply into his cheek, frantically trying to claw at his eyes. Spitting out a curse, he forced his sluggish body to respond by cracking his elbow into his assailant's jaw. It was like hitting a foul smelling tree, even the man's limbs felt like gnarled ropy branches.

Ducking out of the grasping hands, Naruto grabbed the chain draped across his chest and twined it around his arm quickly. With as much force as he could muster, he whipped his arm out and slammed it into into the man's gut. Although it wasn't very far it was enough to at least send his attacker thudding onto his back, giving the blonde the opportunity to scramble back to the far wall. The chain came with him, and he felt his lips twist into a snarl as he flicked his gaze to follow where it came out of the wall and up to a heavy metal collar around his throat.

The despicable...thing...that had attacked him flailed into a crouch and lunged at the chain, gnashing his bloody teeth on it as he tried to pull Naruto back into his reach. His eyes were wild and half rolling back into his head as he looked at the shinobi. Naruto braced his feet on the rough cave floor, lowered his chin a bit, and glared at the vile human-like creature with unflinching stubborn rage. He ignored the blood trickling down the side of his face, kept his chain gripped tight, and refused to budge an inch.

"Eito was right, you are a feisty one," a malicious voice said softly.

Naruto glanced up at the barrel-chested man and scooted himself into a better position to keep both enemies within his line of sight. Jin strolled into the room, though it could hardly be called that as Naruto sized up the rough-hewn cavern. His chain wasn't long enough to reach the narrower archway that made the entrance, and thankfully his 'roommate' wouldn't be able to reach him with the length of chain at his ankles shackling him to the far wall.

Apparently the only option the creature had was to grab Naruto's chain where it was bolted to a ring in the center of the wall opposite the entrance.

"Ogre, what did I tell you about waiting?" Jin asked with a curl to his lip, kicking Ogre in the gut and sending him crashing into the far wall.

"I only wanted an eye," Ogre hissed, scrabbling his feet along the ground and huddling in the corner like a disgruntled snake. "You said I could have him. You said he was mine. Just one eye. I just want one. They're so pretty. I only wanted one...just one...he's mine..." he mumbled, rocking from foot to foot and scratching his broken nails on the stone floor as he stared eagerly at Naruto.

"Shut the fuck up, or I'll take your food away," Jin spat. Ogre snarled with a flash of sharp canines and darted out to snatch up the half-eaten arm lying on the floor where he'd dropped it, turning his back to the other two so he could swiftly finish his meal.

Jin was strong, that was obvious with the way his muscles bunched underneath his clothing. With his own strength drained the way it was, Naruto was sure he couldn't beat the pale-eyed man, but he would damn well put up one hell of a fight. However, what truly unnerved him was the fact that he couldn't sense anything; not chakra, not the bloodlust that had to be oozing out of him, nothing! He shifted his weight onto the balls of his bare feet and braced his back against the wall, feeling only slightly more secure with the heavy chain biting into the flesh of his arm and palm.

"Done trying to figure me out, Pretty Eyes?" Jin grinned viciously, crouching down to face the blonde. "You and I are going to have to have a little talk, but not right now." He stood up and tossed a disgusted look over his shoulder at Ogre before turning back to Naruto. "I'll be back in an hour," he said, then walked out of the room.

Naruto was left to stew over those words, unable to concentrate fully because of the thing that occupied the room with him. Why had he been given an hour? That was a long time to steel himself for whatever torture Jin had in mind. Was the man so confident he'd be able to break Naruto that he didn't think it mattered how much time he gave the blonde to prepare? Or did he need the time to prepare himself for whatever he was planning? Was it a tactic to rattle him just by leaving him in the room with Ogre?

The questions piled up and tumbled around in his brain, more being added and none being answered. How long had he been unconscious? Where was he? How had he gotten there? What day was it? Was it even daytime? Where was the other man he'd mentioned, Eito? How large was the cave system? Were there several rooms, or just a few? Had an hour passed, yet? How deep underground were they? Would Kakashi be able to find him if he was too far undergr-

Naruto cut off his line of thinking with a sharp hiss. He refused to even go down that path, quashing the irritatingly random doubt. He'd been given too much time to think, it was starting to bite him in the ass. It occurred to him that Jin's plan might have involved this very result, and it infuriated him that he had fallen right into it. Kakashi would come. Kakashi would find him if he was buried a thousand miles underground.

Of course, he couldn't help but wish the Jounin would simply appear right then and there, even if it was completely improbable. He couldn't have been gone for more than 12 hours, and as much confidence as he had in Kakashi, Naruto wasn't expecting to see him for at least a few days. He wished he could talk to Kurama. The fox was caustic and arrogant, but he was shrewd and helpful...and Naruto felt insanely guilty about locking him away. Keeping a close eye on Ogre's back, he shifted part of his focus inward to his subconscious. His eyes widened in astonished dread at what he saw. Or, rather, at what he didn't see.

He was trapped in a small black box, only barely large enough for him to sit hunched with his knees drawn up under his chin. His tori gates weren't visible, and he prayed they were still there outside the box. Then again, he also kind of hoped they weren't there. It would take Kurama a day or two to break free from the tori gates he'd pinned him with. And if the fox put some serious effort into it, he could probably weasel his chakra out of the seal without Naruto there keeping the lock tight. The seal had been designed to let small amounts of Kurama's chakra out in the first place.

Gathering chakra was impossible within the box, he couldn't feel anything outside of the minimal amount trapped there. He left the subconscious room alone for the moment, trying to remember how he'd ended up like this. The collar chafed at his neck and the attached chain slid against his chest as he shifted his weight to a slightly more comfortable position. The sensation brought a fuzzy memory to the surface, and he glanced down at himself.

As much as he wanted to stare he also didn't want to risk letting his guard down, so a cursory glance was all his bare torso was given. It wouldn't have helped even if he did keep his eyes glued to the black tattoos. He had no idea what the patterns and archaic symbols meant. What he did know was that each of the five triangular designs were centered over vital points; heart, lung, liver, and kidneys. Thankfully, the seal around his naval wasn't visible.

Narrowing his eyes at Ogre, he kept perfectly still and tried to gather nature chakra to enter Sennin Mode. The balance was off, and he stopped quickly before the scales tipped irreversibly. That was going to take some time and effort to figure out. It was vaguely similar to the time he'd been in Hōzuki-jō, but with that seal he'd at least been able to feel his original store of chakra as well as Kurama's. With this seal, he could only sense enough chakra to pull off that silly card trick.

That thought brought a slight smile to his face. Too bad he didn't have any cards with him... He let his thoughts roll along those tracks, and tried focusing chakra into the end of just one finger. It tingled, and he scratched at the chain link under his wrist.

Lifting his hand, he was greeted with the disappointing result. He'd managed to clean the dirt off the metal. Well...most of the dirt. It wasn't like he had anything better to do, so he simply kept at it. He was certain an hour had passed, and he found himself twitching at every little sound and shadow that ghosted near the entrance to the room. By the time Jin showed up again, his nerves were raw from being on edge.

"I figured you'd be a little antsy, so I came in early," Jin said, squatting down in front of Naruto.

...you lying fuck...

"Why don't we start off with introductions? I'm Jin, what's your name?"

"Don't have one," Naruto replied, his voice gravelly due to his dry throat.

"There's no need to be rude," Jin said, lunging forward.

Naruto was fast enough to throw his arms up to block the attack, but he wasn't strong enough to actually defend against it. The back of his head smashed hard on the wall, and he felt his body go slack as light flashed behind his eyes. Pain lanced through his dizzy thoughts, making it harder for him to think clearly while he coughed on the floor. The taste of blood covered the bitter taste of bile as he involuntarily flicked his tongue out where his lip had been cut on his teeth.

"It's just a name, moron," Jin said derisively. "Have it your way, then, Pretty Eyes. I'll bet you're getting homesick right about now, wishing you'd never been sent out on this pointless mission. Tell me what it's like at home," he said, grabbing a chunk of Naruto's bloodied hair and pulling him back to a sitting position so he could look right at his face. "It gets seriously fucking old being stuck in these caves, and you've been away from home a long time. I know you miss it. I know you think about it. I know that's the one place you really want to be."

Blinking away the fog, Naruto tried not to listen to the words. He fought to suppress the images of Konoha they evoked. He denied the aching pang in his chest.

"Do you miss it?" Jin continued thoughtfully, his grey eyes watching Naruto like a hawk. "Family? Friends? Food? Ahh, looks like you do. I can relate to that. The food here sucks, and all my friends are somewhere else. I don't have any family, though, they died when I was quite young." He narrowed his eyes sharply. "How about you? I wonder if you know what it's like to grow up alone. Why don't you tell me about your parents. How did they die?"

Naruto glared at the man and spat in his face, enraged at his own brain for flitting through his rolodex of memories. He had to focus on one thing, damn it!

"Didn't I say there was no need to be rude?" Jin asked calmly as he wiped the mixture of blood and spit off his face, slamming the blonde's head into the ground and then quickly jerking him back up.

The world tipped sideways and went blurry as Naruto hung limp in the stronger man's grasp. It felt like his scalp was going to be ripped right off the top of his head, and the side of his face was sticky and slick. ...focus...

"I'm just trying to make polite conversation, here. Do you hear me asking about any deep shinobi secrets?"

Naruto forced his muscles to tense and his body to shift so he could ease the pain in his neck and head. ...don't listen to him, focus on one thing...

"You're not going to last long at this rate, Pretty Eyes," Jin sighed. "Ogre gets twitchy at the sight of blood. I can't sit in here and baby-sit all the time, and if you keep acting like an ignorant shithead I might stop coming in here altogether. It's your choice, of course, I just

hope you don't regret it later. Regrets can be pretty torturous things. Kind of like how you regret ever having been picked for this assignment, because now you're chained to the wall, alone and helpless."

...I'm not helpless...I'm not alone...Kakashi will find me...

"Did you leave any regrets at home? Any words left unsaid? Any grudges left unsettled? It's always the words left unsaid that haunt you to your last breath," Jin said quietly, leaning forward a bit. "'I should have said this.' 'I shouldn't have said that.' 'What if that's the last thing they remember about me?'"

The words twisted in his gut like a knife, and he fought the urge to spit in Jin's face again. He might lose consciousness the next time his head was cracked on the floor, and then he'd wake up with an eye missing. ...my regrets can be resolved...Kakashi will find me...

"'Why didn't I tell them what I really wanted to say?' 'What if they never know how I really felt?' 'What if I never find out how they really felt?'"

...Kakashi will find me...he'll find me...he'll find me even if he knows I...

"'What if they never forgive me?'"

Naruto clenched his teeth against the icy stone forming in his belly, glaring malevolently at Jin. ...he'll forgive me...he always forgives me...please, god, let him forgive me one more time...

"Looks like you have a lot of words left unsaid, Pretty Eyes," Jin smiled antagonistically, sitting back on his heels for a moment before standing up. "I'll be back in an hour to finish our conversation," he said, turning and leaving.

Risking a brief moment to close his eyes and take a few deep breaths, Naruto wiped the blood off his face and fought to control his emotions. He had to focus, he couldn't let that asshole get to him! A sharp tug on his arm brought him snapping back to the current situation, and he bared his teeth at Ogre's attempts to drag him closer. He dug his bare heels into the rough stone floor and yanked his chain back so he was again leaning against the wall instead of being pulled forward.

...Kakashi will find me...I have to be ready...I have to think...

While he didn't take his attention away from Ogre, he had absolutely no desire to look at the hungry drooling expression on the thing's face and turned his gaze to the chains at his ankles. He scratched at where he knew the marks on his torso were in irritation, fuming at how they were somehow blocking off his chakra. The sensation brought a faint memory to the surface, and he tried to drag it farther into the light.

He remembered the feeling of being marked, but he couldn't recall seeing anything. What had happened?! He'd been...lying down? It suddenly clicked that he'd heard Jin's voice before. What had he said earlier? Something about the food sucking? That's because he'd been eating...vermin? Dogs had brought food in, and he was complaining about it. He wanted

supplies from somewhere. Where? Kor...Kir...Kon...Koko...Koki...Kōkai! Where the hell was that?!

Naruto scowled, searching his memory for the reason it sounded vaguely familiar. It meant 'red sea', and that was significant somehow. Obviously it was a coastal city or village, but there was more to it than that. The 'red' was tugging at him, urging him to associate it with...with...red...hair? Gaara! Kōkai was in the Land of Wind! He'd been there last year and teased the Kazekage about how the sunset made the sea almost as red as his hair. Gaara hadn't quite gotten the joke, but he'd been a little amused at it anyway.

The memories were still hazy, but they were coming to him easier. The other voice had been there, too, the one that had drained his chakra. It wasn't all that surprising that he hadn't come into the room, but Naruto felt like there was a reason behind it. Almost like he knew the man had left. Why? Where had he gone? No...he hadn't gone...he had but he hadn't. A clone had gone because he'd gotten high off Naruto's chakra.

The word 'high' prodded his mind, but he couldn't figure out why.

What about him being drunk off too much chakra? Wait...not drunk, high. High as in up. Hadn't Jin mentioned something about snow-

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Pretty Eyes," Jin sneered as he walked into the small cave. "Now, what were we talking about?"

Naruto glowered at the man, his entire train of thought derailed. It hadn't even been half an hour since Jin had left, and the urge to hurl curses at him was almost overwhelming. When he wanted him to show up he didn't, and when he didn't want him to show up he did. That was going to get very old, very quickly. He gripped the chain tight in his fist and braced his back against the wall as Jin squatted down in front of him.

"Ah, that's right, we were talking about regrets," he said narrowing his eyes and scrutinizing Naruto's face. "Looks like you're starting to come to terms with some of yours. That's good," he nodded, sitting back on his heels. "You can't cling to trash like that, especially in your situation. It'll only drag you down and break you. You should be thinking about the good things in life. Like all the fun you had with your friends back home."

Wise to the game now, Naruto defiantly refused to let his mind wander away from one single thought. ...Kakashi will find me...

"Those are precious memories that'll keep you going in a place like this."

...Kakashi will find me...

"The laughter of your friends."

...Kakashi will find me...

"The taste of good food."

...Kakashi will find me...

"The touch of a lover."

Naruto's eyes widened as his focus shattered. He couldn't bring himself to repeat the words in his head that had kept him stable, and suddenly Jin's hand was blocking his vision.

A sharp pain around his right eye had him flinching back reflexively, and he felt something jagged scrape over the bridge of his nose along with an awful stench. With a gasp of horror, he snapped his eyes open and started struggling viciously against the hands that grasped and clawed at him from where he lay on the ground. He landed a good clean hit with his knee as he brought it up to smash it into Ogre's temple.

The creature tumbled to the floor with a furious snarl, and Naruto scrambled frantically to his side of the room. His collar dug harshly into his windpipe, jerking him onto his back. Gritting his teeth, he spun around and hooked his foot around his chain before slamming it to the ground to stop it from pulling at him.

"I just want one!" Ogre screamed, throwing his weight into hauling on Naruto's chain. "Just one eye! I've waited long enough, you're mine! MINE! They said I could have one! You don't need both of them!"

"Yes, I do!" Naruto shouted hoarsely, grabbing his chain with both hands and kicking back with all the meager strength he had in his trembling legs.

It was enough to pry the metal links from Ogre's grasp, and Naruto tumbled hard against the wall. Quickly reeling in what little slack there was as his adrenaline shot his heart rate through the roof, he wrapped the chain around his arm and kept it taut. Ogre shrieked at the blonde's defiance, lunging at the chain to gnaw and thrash at it like a rabid animal.

"Holy shit, will you shut the fuck up!" Eito bellowed, stomping into the cave and sending Ogre crashing back into his corner with a merciless kick. "Just give him the eye, he'll leave you alone for a whole damn day if you bribe him with something," the tall broad-shouldered man said as he turned to Naruto in irate impatience. He tossed a water-skin at Naruto's feet. "There, that's your breakfast. You want to keep getting fed, then you better keep that water-skin intact. I'll be back in an hour to collect it whether it's empty or not," he said, turning on his heel to leave.

Naruto hadn't really given himself the opportunity to think about being hungry or thirsty, but as he picked up the water-skin he abruptly felt like he would keel over if he didn't get some kind of moisture into his system. An 'hour' meant nothing, and he wouldn't be surprised if Eito returned in the next thirty seconds. Twisting the stopper free, he gave the contents a careful sniff, ignoring the scratching and whining from Ogre as the thing paced in his corner. There didn't seem to be any unnatural smells in the water, but that didn't mean that it hadn't been laced with something.

He poured bit into his mouth and then spat it out into his cupped palm. No strange tastes, either, and the color was clear. He quickly washed the scratches on his face with the water in his hand. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. Ogre had the scent of decay clinging to him, and Naruto was certain he'd be getting infections from the scratches if he just let them

be. The earlier injuries were sore and scabbed over. It surprised him that he was still healing at such a quick rate without being able to access his own or Kurama's chakra.

Clutching the water-skin, he resisted the desire to drink and gave himself an internal assessment. It was a risk, sitting and waiting to feel any kinds of effects from having had the water in his mouth, but it was one he had to take. The biggest risk would be to guzzle the water without testing it. The just slightly less risky thing to do was simply to drink it, and Naruto had a very intense internal war over that issue.

Jin must have put him under a genjutsu when his focus broke, probably to try to get information. The fact that he was still alive, being given the opportunity to escape from Ogre, and also having water handed to him meant one of two things. The genjutsu hadn't worked and Ino's mental blocks were still in place, or Jin and Eito were twisted sadistic bastards who wanted to drug him before handing him over to Ogre.

Naruto drank the water.

He couldn't deny the fact that Jin and Eito were twisted sadistic bastards, but he got the impression that they were the type to just cut Ogre's chains when the time came to dispose of the shinobi. They still needed him alive. Not necessarily in one piece, according to Eito's advice, but still alive. Naruto glared at Ogre, taking a breath from swigging the water much too fast for his belly's comfort. The creature was watching him alertly, rocking from foot to foot and searching for an opening where he could drag Naruto back to his side of the cave.

The minutes ticked by, and Naruto set the empty water-skin aside. He could feel his nerves starting to twitch, anticipating either Eito or Jin's arrival. Scolding himself heartily, he pulled his knees up to rest his arms on them while he braced his feet on the floor and his back at the wall to keep the chain taut. He couldn't waste his time playing by their rules, he had to think.

Calling up the memories he'd been wrestling over before Jin interrupted him wasn't easy, but hearing Eito's voice helped wrangle them to the surface. He'd said he would be 'high', and that had piqued Naruto's interest. What about high? Something about height...and...and...and what?! And something else! What the hell was it?! What was high? Trees? The sky? Clouds? Wait...clouds...white...snow!

Jin had mentioned sending a clone out because the snow would be melted. Another location to prepare. Did that mean they'd be moving? Shit, that wasn't good. If the snow had melted, that probably meant it was somewhere higher in the mountains. Naruto remembered seeing the white-capped mountains far in the distance from the ryokan, but there were other mountain ranges even farther away. Where the hell was he now?!

Ogre hunched forward as Naruto focused his attention on thinking, tensing and ready to jump on the chain. Naruto pulled his lip back in disgust and threw a small pebble at the man. Ogre ducked out of the way easily, hissing and spitting his displeasure. Picking up a slightly larger bit of stone, one about the size of the end of his thumb, Naruto rolled it in the palm of his hand thoughtfully. If he was going to be moved, he'd need to leave a message for Kakashi.

Focusing his chakra in his fingertips, he scratched a faint groove in the stone. It was so shallow it was only visible when he tilted the small rock into the light coming in from the

entrance, but it almost felt as if his chakra was a tiny bit stronger than when he'd scratched at his chain. A plan started to brew in the back of his mind, and he whipped the stone at Ogre as the creature inched forward.

"Didn't your mama teach you not to throw things indoors?" Eito growled, stalking into the room and picking up the empty water-skin.

He left without another word or glance at either of the cave's occupants, and Naruto was a bit startled to realize that it actually felt as if an hour had passed since Eito had first come in. Either he was the punctual one, or the pair were fucking with him. Naruto suspected the latter. Without an announcement of returning, he wondered if either of them would come back anytime soon.

He picked up another small stone, grinding it a bit on the floor to make the surface somewhat flatter but not noticeably so from a distance. Rolling it in his palm, he visualized the image of a number and a kanji in his head. He'd have to be careful, there wasn't much room to work with and it needed to be legible. Not having been taught the ANBU code didn't mean he couldn't come up with his own, and Kakashi was smart enough to be able to figure it out.

Bringing his hand up to his cut lip, he scraped the back of the stone over the small wound. That would have to be enough. Eito had dogs, and Naruto wasn't sure how thoroughly they would sweep the room before they left. His scent was already on Ogre, so it should go unnoticed to them. He cupped the pebble in the palm of his hand and narrowed his eyes at Ogre. He wouldn't be able to take his gaze from the creature, so he split his focus into his subconscious so he could see what he was attempting to write.

It didn't take long for Ogre to figure out Naruto wasn't paying complete attention to his surroundings, but it was all the time the blonde needed. A quick glance at the stone in the light revealed a shaky 17 and the kanji for 'love'. Putting a prayer in his hand, he threw it at Ogre before the man reached his chain. Ogre hissed and ducked away from the stone, scuttling back to his previous position. A few minutes later the second message – the number 24 and an Uzumaki swirl – was hurled at the enraged creature with another prayer, bouncing off the wall and landing a few feet from the first in the shadowy corner.

"You're just downright boorish throwing stones at a caged animal, Pretty Eyes," Jin said from the entrance.

Naruto slid a venomous look at the barrel-chested man, remaining silent. He was really starting to hate that fucking nickname...

"We're going to have to have a talk about how you don't play well with others," he said with a shake of his head, then tilted a dark smile and formed a few seals. "But not now. Maybe in an hour."

The first thing Naruto was aware of was how uncomfortably warm he felt. He'd never really been the type to get cold, and he'd certainly suffered through the heat of summer enough to understand how it felt to be boiling hot. But somehow this was different, it was like he was too hot on the inside, and that made him feel too cold on the outside. His fuzzy brain mulled

over the confusing juxtaposition and eventually decided it was an unpleasant experience that he needed to fix.

He cracked his eyes open and licked his dry lips, staring blankly at a dimly lit stone wall that had a distinctly different color than before. They'd moved. The hideously familiar sound of metal rasping against the floor made him grimace, but he was careful to keep his body still and his breathing even. If Ogre hadn't snatched his chain yet, then he wasn't about to move and give him any excuse to do so. His mind slowly cleared, and he took a minute to give himself an internal once-over.

Both eyes were still there, so that was good. He didn't feel like he was missing any fingers or toes, but he didn't dare try wiggling them while he had this one little moment to himself. Closing his eyes, he checked his subconscious and glowered at the tight box that surrounded him. He tried gathering chakra, and wondered if it was just his imagination that made him think he could feel a bit more than before. He was entirely unaccustomed to having such a low reserve on hand, so it was likely that he was simply giving himself false hope.

Frustration welled up in him, and he had to fight to keep his body from tensing up. He was so completely *useless* like this! Jin was playing him like a fool getting under his skin with everything he said, and the only scrap of information he'd been able to gather was probably totally worthless! Was that really all he could do? Be bait on the end of a hook? While he truly believed Kakashi would get his messages and find him, it rankled him that he was just laying there waiting to be rescued. He'd give anything to have the Jounin's sharp senses, so he could at least hear what was going on.

Naruto narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. He'd never be able to compare to Kakashi's hearing, but he could at least give it a try. What did he have to lose? He closed his eyes again and focused his minuscule chakra into his ears. Concentrating on listening to anything he could hear, he worked his way around the room. He ignored the sound of his own body, turning his attention to the scrape of metal on stone behind him. There was the soft padding of feet shifting under Ogre's weight as he rocked in place.

Farther. He needed to go farther.

He could hear the soft hissing noise of Ogre's breathing, and the brush of matted hair against his rough skin. A faint rhythmic cadence caught his attention, and he followed it. Voices. They were garbled and distant, half the words covered up by the rasp of Ogre's chain. He couldn't even figure out who was talking, but he put all his concentration on trying to understand the sporadic speech.

"...uch longer...u're fin...tting sick of...ant to...ck to Kuro no Oka."

...Kuro no Oka?...

"...ave him bro...days...an't go...any infor...that Arai will..."

...Arai?...

"...we might...ove again...ucking persist...n with...dogs dea...on't trust...ff us out."

"...your fault...ave killed all..."

"Fuck you!" Eito shouted. "There were six Jounin-trained ninken I had to pick off!"

...six?...

"...astards wer...used summon...one surviv..."

...one...survived... Naruto pushed his emotions back, gritting his teeth and keeping his focus.

"...ever find...one fucking do-"

Naruto's concentration was shattered as his collar choked the breath out of him, skidding him across the floor painfully. His limbs were slow to respond, heavy and weary as if he'd been training for days on end instead of lying on the floor. He managed to kick his foot up into Ogre's mouth, gurgling out a yelp as the man bit down hard and clawed at Naruto's calf. Forcing his heavy body to obey, he pivoted on his shoulder and cracked his other heel into the side of Ogre's neck.

The strong jaw let go as Ogre staggered to the side, and Naruto scrambled back out of reach. His hands were clumsier than they should have been, and there was a brief desperate tug-of-war between the two before Naruto got the chain wrapped securely around his arm. Trying to dig his heels into the floor and push himself back was difficult, his one foot sliding on the small puddles of blood beneath it.

The stand-off was broken by Jin entering the room and driving his foot into Ogre's gut. The creature crashed into the wall and skittered to the corner, glaring at Naruto balefully as he licked his lips. Naruto shuffled swiftly back into his own corner and braced himself against the wall in a wary crouch. His breath was coming too fast. Why was he so tired?!

"You should have taken Eito's advice," Jin grinned maliciously. "Ogre will leave you alone if you bribe him with food, Pretty Eyes. Here, lunch," he said, tossing the water-skin at the blonde's feet. "I'll be back in an hour."

Naruto watched him leave with heated fury, snatching up the water-skin and twisting off the stopper. He was so damn thirsty it was unbelievable, but he clenched his teeth and went through the motions he'd done before to test the water and clean his wounds. The cuts on his face and head felt hot, and though they seemed to be healing they were still swollen and tender. His foot and leg were bleeding pretty bad, so he ripped strips of cloth from his torn slacks to bind the wounds.

With that finished, and no discernible side-effects from tasting the water, he tipped the skin back and guzzled it all in one go. His stomach threatened to rebel against the harsh treatment, but he covered his mouth and held it in. A short few minutes later he was glad he'd been so hasty, because Jin came strolling through the entrance. The man picked up the empty water-skin and squatted down in front of Naruto, scrutinizing him carefully.

"You don't look so good, Pretty Eyes," Jin said thoughtfully. "You need to take better care of yourself, or you might get sick. Didn't anyone teach you that?"

Naruto pulled his lips back in a silent snarl, hunching his shoulders and frantically beating back the memories clawing at his mind.

"Surely someone must have. You were so healthy when you first got here. Someone had to have cared enough about you to at least tell you the basics."

Naruto put as much weight onto his injured leg as he could without having the limb buckle beneath him, focusing on the pain so he wouldn't think about anything else.

"Stuff like brushing your teeth. Washing your hair. Eating your vegetables."

Naruto flinched subtly at the last sentence, images of Kakashi bringing him food when he was younger and always telling him to eat more than just ramen breaking through. The last time he'd seen the Jounin in Konoha he had said the same thing. That night Naruto had stayed with with him and- Jin's hand was blocking his vision before he could suppress the memories.

A low rumbling sound dragged him out of the darkness, and for a brief moment he wondered if the cave was collapsing around him. That would be bad. He was fairly sure he should try to do something about it before he was buried alive, and he struggled toward consciousness. The rumbling got louder, closer, and a deep instinctive fear hauled him swiftly into a hazy bewildering reality. He was going to be eaten!

Naruto's eyes snapped open, staring wildly at the growling animal crouched over him on his left. It was out of focus, but his brain identified the profile instantly on a base primitive level and started screaming at him to run. The wolf was lean and rangy, head low and ears forward in an aggressive stance. Its bright amber eyes were glowing with a bestial fury, its mouth slightly open and sharp fangs bared in a snarl only a few inches above his chest. Its gray muzzle was stained red, and he could feel the blood dripping onto his skin.

...holy fuck, it's already started to eat me!...

Before he could even try to blink the fog out of his head and eyes, a familiar shriek came from his right and the metal collar dug into his throat. There was a blur of movement and a chaos of sounds behind him as his chain abruptly went slack, leaving him coughing on the floor as he willed his sluggish body to respond to his commands. He clawed his way back to his corner without looking back. He was aware of animalistic hissing, growling and snarling, the scratching of nails and metal on the ground, and finally a gurgling yelping whine as one of the creatures lost the short violent battle.

Fumbling at his chain to try to grab onto it as he reached the wall, he found himself hoping that the wolf had been the victor. At least he still had a vague fighting chance against the canine in his weakened condition. He couldn't get his legs under him as he turned around to brace himself against the rough stone at his back. Muzzy blue eyes met savage amber ones as the wolf lunged at his throat, and he actually barked out a laugh of relief.

"You should have listened-" Eito stopped short in the entrance, his eyes going wide at the scene.

The wolf didn't pay any attention to the interruption, jaws clamping down on the chain links welded to Naruto's collar and front paws pinning the blonde to the wall. He grunted as the weight hit his chest, bringing his knees up to try to shove the heavy animal off of him. His fingers pulled and slipped through the blood-soaked fur.

"Shit! Fucking scavengers," Eito spat, pulling out a long hunting knife from under the back of his jacket and running forward.

Naruto gasped and toppled over as the wolf jerked its head to the side and pushed off of him to spin around to face Eito, who was jumping back in enraged shock. Naruto clutched at his neck, his mind grinding to a halt at what had just happened, and at what was continuing to happen right in front of him. The collar was gone and the chain was yanked out of his limp fingers. The wolf darted toward Eito, dropping the chain from its mouth as it was wrapped in smoke, and Kakashi grabbed it before it hit the ground without breaking his stride.

The Jounin had the wolf pelt draped over his head and back like a cloak from some old tribal ritual. Barefooted, bare-chested, and wearing slacks that were starting to get tattered at his ankles, he was covered in dirt and blood from head to toe. Naruto couldn't have been gone for more than two or three days, what the hell had Kakashi been doing to himself?! His brain just wasn't working on a high enough level for him to grasp all of it at once.

Kakashi had the advantage with Eito caught off guard, and he used it to drive the man back toward the unmoving body of Ogre by swinging the broken collar like a flail. Eito was quick to recover, however, and caught a link of the chain with his knife as he ducked. Sinking the knife into the wall, he pinned the chain down and aimed a kick at the Jounin's knee. Kakashi blocked it with his forearm, side stepping and wrapping his other arm around the chain to yank it out of the wall.

The knife came with it, slicing straight at Eito's throat. Eito hissed and spun out of the way, throwing up his arm to take the blow instead of the side of his neck. Kakashi was relentless in keeping his momentum, stepping forward and flicking his wrist to swing the end of the chain back for another attack. Eito had another knife in his hand by the time he danced back toward the wall opposite the entrance to block the assault, and Naruto finally got a good look at Kakashi's masked face.

It didn't surprise him that Kakashi's eyes looked as savage as the wolf's had been, but what did surprise and frighten him were the telltale signs of exhaustion. He didn't have his forehead protector on, and Naruto had to wonder how much Kakashi had been using his sharingan over the last few days. The assessment only took a split-second, and Eito was hooking his knife in the links of the chain as it whipped past him. Eito yanked on it and pivoted to drive his elbow toward Kakashi's jaw, trying to push the Jounin back.

Movement at the edge of Naruto's vision wrenched his attention from the fight, and he saw Jin standing in the entranceway. The pale-eyed man started forming seals, watching Kakashi's back with calculated menace. Shit! With just Eito, Naruto was certain Kakashi would have the fight won shortly, but now that Jin had returned it was a much more dangerous situation. Jin's fingers started to turn black, as if an invisible force was painting them with ink, and strange triangular shapes glowed red on his palms. They were the same as the tattoos on the blonde's torso...

Something in Naruto snapped, and time came to a standstill. Overwhelming rage started to boil in him and burn off the fog in his head. *I have to get up and do something!* His blood felt like it was catching on fire and blistering his flesh. *I can't let Jin touch Kakashi!* He screamed within his own mind, kicking and clawing at the black box that trapped him. *I won't let you!* Colors, scents, sounds; they were all becoming clearer as the fury wound its way through him like a poison. *I WON'T LET YOU!* The roaring in his head resonated and echoed as if there were two voices howling, churning with unforgiving hatred and unyielding malice while strength ripped painfully at his muscles.

I WON'T LET YOU HAVE HIM! HE'S MINE!

Time clicked back into motion and Naruto bolted across the room, scratching at the ground to keep his balance low. Jin's hands were black all the way to his wrists as he stepped forward to join the fight. The man was only able to take one step before Naruto was on him, leaping up to hurl them both into the air out in the hallway. Naruto grabbed Jin's forearms and pulled his own knees up to rest them securely in the hollows of Jin's shoulders. Jin's eyes went wide with horrified panic, and he swiveled his hips to drive his knee painfully into Naruto's back as he tried to break loose.

Naruto ignored it, tightening his grip on Jin's arms and yanking them hard so they were straight. Jin shrieked as he hit the floor with the blonde's full weight smashing into his shoulder joints under the points of his knees. The sound of crunching bone was disgustingly satisfying, but not as satisfying as the sight of Jin's eyes rolling back as he went unconscious. Naruto panted and gasped, the rage fading away to leave him inhumanly exhausted.

Everything hurt. His brain was going fuzzy again and he coughed agonizingly, tasting warm metal. It felt like there was a hole in his chest. He looked down. Holy shit, there *was* a hole in his chest! Somewhere far away in his mind he acknowledged the fact that the injury was in the exact same spot as one of the inked marks had been. He didn't like it. There was blood everywhere. He should probably try to do something about that.

His arms hung limp at his sides, and his fingers twitched as he tried to lift his hands. He tried harder and felt his balance wobble. That was bad. He better just stay still. Stay still and breathe. Breathing hurt. It felt like he was half drowning as he choked on the liquid filling his lung. The hallway was getting darker. That was bad, too. He needed to stay awake. Staying awake hurt, too. He wished Kakashi would come help lift his hands for him so he could stop the bleeding. That would be good. Something cool wrapped around him, pulling him gently back off of Jin.

"Oh, there you are..." Naruto rasped with a smile, his head tilting back against Kakashi's arm as the Jounin carefully settled him on the ground. "I was just...thinking 'bout you..."

"Don't talk," Kakashi said quietly and firmly, digging into the pouch at his belt to retrieve first aid supplies.

The contented smile stayed in place, and Naruto watched Kakashi's face as he leaned over to start wrapping the bandages around his chest. It was over. Kakashi had found him. The nightmare was actually over. Something nagged at the back of his fluffy mind as the shadows closed in. Wait...it wasn't over...something was...something needed to...needed to be... Ah!

"...ait..." Naruto coughed, trying to get his voice to work as he choked and swallowed blood. "...ahav...te..."

"Naruto, please, stop talking," Kakashi pleaded, tying off the bandages and resting one hand on Naruto's cheek while he smoothed ointment over the aching scratches on his face with the other.

Kakashi's palm and fingers were wonderfully cool against his skin. He wanted to obey. He wanted to do what the Jounin asked, so that frightened desperate expression left his one open eye. Tears made his vision swim and he shook his head subtly, blinking and digging up his last reserves of strength to lift a trembling hand.

"...pen..." Naruto whispered, sliding his fingers across the scar over Kakashi's left eye. He looked straight into the blood-red sharingan with weary gratitude as Kakashi opened his eye. He mouthed the two things he'd overheard, knowing the Jounin could read his lips. 'Kuro no Oka'. 'Arai'.

Everything was being washed away, because it was over and Kakashi was there. It was all fading; the pain, the guilt, the regret, the fear, the hate, the rage, the disgust, even that horrible nickname. He felt a smile tug at his mouth, and he let his fingers brush the scar below the sharingan before his arm flopped lifelessly to the ground. It was funny, in a way. He'd never noticed it before. ...you really do have pretty eyes... He felt so delightfully guilty feeling so happy that Kakashi's mismatched eyes were the last thing he saw as the darkness swallowed him up.

Kakashi knelt there for a long few moments, completely motionless. ...that didn't...happen... He felt something twist and fracture in his chest, and he found himself unaccountably gasping for air. ...he didn't just say I had... He closed his eyes and whipped his head from side to side fiercely, trying to get his body to stop shaking like a leaf in the wind as his heart pounded in his ears. ...I didn't see that!...

The exhaustion was consuming him, that's all it was! It wasn't that he... It wasn't because... It wasn't... It hurt! His hands acted of their own accord, sliding under Naruto's back and lacing his fingers through the damp blonde hair to support his neck so he could lift and clutch the limp body to his chest. Too thin. Too fragile. ...I never should have let you in... Kakashi buried his face in Naruto's shoulder and screamed.

He had to take several deep breaths before he finally calmed down, hating the fact that Naruto's warm scent was what helped him gather his wits. A harsh jolt down his spine reminded him that he was at the end of his rope, and he better get outside before he collapsed. Scooping the unconscious blonde up in his arms took a concentrated effort, but he clenched his teeth and stumbled down the dimly lit winding passage.

The fresh early morning air was cool on Kakashi's skin, a stark contrast to the hot feverish body held against his chest. He leaned his back on the granite outcrop, letting the rough stone drag the wolf pelt over his head as he slid down to sit and wait. Cradling Naruto in his lap, he brought his knees up a bit to help brace him and held the blonde head against the side of his neck.

With his injury the young man would be able to breathe a bit easier if he was sitting up, and at least this way he could make sure Naruto didn't topple over. It was a sad excuse to use for the sole purpose of keeping Naruto as close as possible. He could feel the shallow panting against his throat. He could feel the hitching rise and fall of a chest struggling to breathe. He could feel the abnormal amount of heat radiating off fevered skin. He could feel the life. The life that had somehow wormed its way through the wall and built a nest in the empty space he guarded so carefully.

He fumbled at the wolf hide that had fallen to the ground next to him, untying the front paws and wrapping the gray pelt around Naruto's shoulders to keep the wind off him. The heavy scent of the pelt would keep most of the scavengers from investigating the smell of blood. It had been an invaluable tool, letting him get in close enough to kill the guard dogs without them realizing he was human and setting off an alarm. He'd had to ditch most of his clothes as well, shedding anything with his or the scent of his ninken on it before dirtying himself up with pungent grasses and mud.

...god, I need a bath...

He draped his arms loosely around Naruto's waist, and let his eye go out of focus as he drifted into a half-doze to conserve his strength. Numbness was creeping into his bones, and unconsciousness called out to him with a siren's song. The ragged breaths skating across his throat kept him from surrendering to the intoxicating melody of sleep. Sai should be there in a few hours, that little ink falcon had zipped off almost too fast for his sharingan to follow it. He'd have to wait on passing out till then.

Using Kamui to break Naruto's collar had been a necessary maneuver, but a costly one considering his already drained state when he'd arrived. It had been his best option for a swift way to free Naruto without wasting time transforming so he could form seals. He'd had to suppress nearly all his chakra and stay transformed until the sensory-type was drawn fully into the room where Kakashi could ambush him. He had known the second man would come in eventually, and he'd hoped to take out the first one before his partner arrived.

What he hadn't been prepared for was having Naruto go batshit insane by jumping into the fight when he could barely prop himself against the wall. He'd taken the second man down as soon as he'd arrived, giving Kakashi the opening he'd needed to end his own battle. In retrospect, he really should have expected and been prepared for the blonde to pull out some miracle reserve of strength. The fool was still far too willing to toss his own health and safety aside to protect others. It didn't help that Kakashi knew he'd honestly needed it at that time, but the cost was too damn high. He couldn't let Naruto keep doing that. He was going to have to pin him down and beat a promise out of him if he had to...

A shadow strafed across his line of sight, and he flinched back into semi-sharp awareness. Had it been that long already? His thoughts were slowly bubbling in his head like tar, and he decided it really didn't matter how long it had been. The large white hawk hadn't even landed properly before Sai was leaping off its back and pelting the few steps to kneel next to where the pair was. Grimacing and gritting his teeth, he forced his arm to lift off the ground and grab the young man's vest before he could start asking questions.

"Three bodies inside," Kakashi said, his voice sounding gravelly in

his own ears. "One dead, one dying, and one alive. We have to bring them back. Also, send this message out to the Kages along with this location: 'Kuro no Oka', and the name 'Arai'."

"Understood," Sai nodded, his calm voice a vivid contrast to the fearful concern in his wide eyes.

"Hey, check it out," he chuckled, letting his hand drop as his vision started to fade. "It took me almost ten days...but I got him back in one piece...Sakura won't have to rip my arms off, now..."

If Sai replied at all, Kakashi never heard it.

My Plans Didn't Work Out Like I Thought

Kakashi shifted on the bed, trying to go back to sleep. He was restless and uncomfortable, the marrow in his bones pinging just unpleasantly enough to keep him awake. Grumbling a heavy sigh, he cracked his eye open and gave the dark window an ugly look. God, he hated being in the hospital. It smelled like antiseptic, blood, floor cleaners, flowers, and misery. He wished the window wasn't so far away. He wished he could just reach out and open it.

The sound of comfortable shoes walking down the hall in a brisk manner had him turning his sour expression toward the door. Actually, what he really wished was for the night duty nurse to stop *closing* the window... He gave a relenting sigh and struggled to sit up, grimacing at the deep aching pain that seemed to have no discernible source other than 'everywhere'. He managed to reposition his pillow and scoot himself back to lean against the metal frame, absently scratching at the fabric of his sleeveless shirt where it itched his collarbone.

He stretched out his arm and fumbled at the lamp by his bedside till it switched on. Someone – probably Gai – had smuggled his Icha Icha collection in and put the books into the small drawer in the side table, so he plucked one out and let his eye follow the words without really reading them. The uneven padding of clumsy bare feet caught his attention a few minutes later, and he looked at the closed door in idle curiosity.

"I am opening it," Naruto's voice said with a slight slur.

Kakashi's eye flew wide open in stunned disbelief, the book slipping from his numb fingers. What the hell was he doing up?! It had only been three days since they'd returned to Konoha, and he had been told Naruto was in a coma with a high-grade fever! *Why the fuck wasn't someone watching him?!*

"I don't like this door...I think it's broken. Can we try another one? Why not?"

The twinges of anger and fear scratching at his insides twisted into a force that had his pulse getting faster. The pauses between Naruto's sentences made it sound like he was having a conversation with someone, but Kakashi knew there was no one out there with him. He looked down at his legs with an expression bordering on panic, and weakly tried to kick free of his blanket as he lunged for the crutches leaning on the wall. He had to get Naruto in the room so he could figure out what was going on!

"Are you sur—ahh!" Naruto stumbled against the door as it slid open, clawing at it and somehow succeeding in keeping his legs from buckling under him. "Oh, hey, I fixed it!" He smiled triumphantly, his blue eyes glazed over and staring right past the spot where Kakashi was sitting on his bed.

The Jounin's heart stopped as he looked at those blank eyes, his hand freezing where it gripped the crutches. Naruto's color was several shades too pale, except for the slight flush on his sweat-dampened cheeks. His breath was coming in short wheezing gasps, and there were a few specks of red on his lips. His nightshirt was open with half the buttons missing, exposing the white bandages wrapped around his torso. In the space between the waistband

of his pajamas and the bottom of the bandages Kakashi could see glimpses of black ink: one mostly hidden swirl pattern that was supposed to be there, and two angular ones that were not.

His stomach clenched at the memory of seeing those triangular seals for the first time, crouched and boiling with a maddening rage in a dark cave high in the mountains after nine and a half solid days of hunting. It had taken him a week to find the first location, and six of his pack had been ambushed while they were spread out tracking separately. Five of them had been forced to retreat via summons as they received near-fatal injuries, but Bull had dragged himself back to the searching Jounin in bloody tatters with a rangy wolf following close behind. The big dog had called it a 'gift' before collapsing and vanishing.

Pakkun and Shiba had been able to avoid being discovered because they were on the far edges of the search pattern, and not within the sensory-type's range. When they finally made it to the first site it had already been empty for a few days. Pakkun was the one to find the two messages carved on the pebbles, and Kakashi had sent the pair off to Suna and Iwa with the information. He had been left alone to pray he was interpreting the indicated haiku page correctly, and had only been able to find Naruto in the second winding cave by scent. The young man's chakra had been almost nonexistent.

Naruto blinked a few times and squinted, his eyes trying to pull focus as he looked around the room. "This isn't outside. But you said I could. I don't want to stay...I'm hot," he whimpered, looking plaintively to his left at someone who wasn't there.

Shit, he was trying to get outside! Kakashi had to stop him somehow! And where the hell was that stupid nurse?!

"Naruto!" Kakashi snapped forcefully, letting go of his crutches. It would be an act of humiliating futility to try and chase the blonde in his current state of useless, and now that Naruto was in the room all he had to do was get the delirious idiot within reach. "You shouldn't stand in the doorway like that, why don't you come inside," he said in a more soothing tone.

"Huh?" Naruto swung his head around, teetering at the movement as he took an unsteady step into the room. His eyes searched for the source of the voice for several seconds, finally focusing on Kakashi with a slightly delayed reaction of surprise. "Oh, Kakashi, what are you...doing in the dark? Are you asleep?"

"I...no, I'm awake," he replied, shaking his head a bit at the bizarre questions. This was bad.

"You shouldn't stay in here...it's really hot," Naruto said miserably, rubbing at his forehead as his gaze drifted around.

"It's cooler over here, though," Kakashi said reaching out an arm to wave the young man over.

"It is?" The blonde asked with heartbreaking hope in his pitiful expression, taking a few weaving steps forward.

"It really is," the Jounin nodded encouragingly. "Come here and tell me who you were talking to earlier." His hand was only a few inches from Naruto, and he could feel the heat cascading off of him.

"Oh, I was talking to Kurama," Naruto said, turning his head and swaying to his left just as Kakashi's hand grabbed empty air instead of his sleeve.

"Were you, now..." Kakashi grated, hooking his arm on the bedframe at his back and reaching the other out as far as he could without toppling to the floor. "How about you sit down and tell me about it." His fingertips brushed the white shirt. Damn it, just a little farther!

"But I'm hot. I wanna go outside," he begged, his bleary eyes falling on the half-open door.

"I told you it wasn't as hot over by me, didn't I?" Kakashi said quickly, making his voice as persuasive as possible and burying his frustration as Naruto took a step toward the door.

"I don't know...I don't remember," Naruto said, turning back around haltingly as his balance wavered. "Oh, that's a good idea! You can come with me!" He smiled brightly, tipping forward a little as he took a step nearer the bed.

"I think it would be better if we both stayed here," Kakashi replied, straining to reach the blonde and managing to slide his fingertips along the distinctive markings on Naruto's face. "See? That's cooler, isn't it?"

"Oh my god, yes." Naruto's eyelids drooped in an expression of divine pleasure as he leaned into the touch, staggering forward and pressing his cheek into Kakashi's palm while his fingers curled loosely around the Jounin's wrist.

Kakashi's eye widened as his entire body went rigid, and he flinched his hand back a tiny bit before he stopped himself. He could feel his face turning a ridiculous shade of pink, and he cursed inwardly at himself while Naruto tilted forward to follow the blessedly cold hand. Reeling the young man in was wretchedly easy, all he had to do was slowly pull his arm back and Naruto shuffled forward to keep the contact. When he got close enough, Kakashi unhooked his arm from the bedframe behind him and rested his hand on the back of Naruto's neck.

That was, in all honesty, the extent of Kakashi's plan; to bribe Naruto into staying still by putting his cold hands on the young man's face and neck. That. Was. It. Unfortunately, the plan imploded rather spectacularly when the touch on his neck elicited a soft moan from the blonde...who then proceeded to clumsily try to crawl onto the bed in order to get closer to the source of the only relief he could find from his suffering. That source being: Kakashi.

Time froze for a brief moment, and the Jounin was aware of a significant choice he had to make. He could tighten his grip and lock his elbows to halt any forward progress, and then hope Naruto wouldn't collapse before help arrived. Or, he could...he could just...just this once...just hold him this one last time... He could feel the ribs prominently, even with the bandages and shirt covering them as he circled his arm around Naruto's back to help pull him up onto the bed. He wanted to scream, but he choked it down.

Slipping the fingers of his other hand through the soft blonde hair, he let the young man snuggle into the hollow of his shoulder. He smoothed the hair off Naruto's damp forehead, allowing the scent of windswept grass and sunlight to wash away the noxious hospital odors. A warm arm draped across Kakashi's chest and hip as Naruto's other arm was tucked in next to his side.

"...this is nice..." Naruto mumbled, his lightly shivering frame relaxing as fatigue overtook him.

Kakashi settled his hand over Naruto's forehead and eyes, refusing to allow himself the option of even considering a response to that statement. Within 30 seconds the blonde's uneven raspy breathing was at a steady rhythmic pace that was a half second shy of qualifying as panting. Rifling under the almost-discarded blankets, he retrieved his book and started reading as he waited for the wayward nurse to return.

The minutes ticked by, and he snapped the book closed at the sound of a brisk pace and comfortable shoes. They walked by his door and he set the book aside. He should have called out, but he didn't. He counted the paces to Naruto's door. 5...4...3...2...1... Something fragile shattered on the floor, and the comfortable shoes scurried and sprinted down the hall. They came to a screeching halt at his door.

"Kakashi-san, did you see-" The nurse's frantic words were cut off with a gasp, and she took a step into the room. "I'm so sorry, I only stepped out for a minute-"

"I don't care," Kakashi interrupted coldly, giving the startled woman a viper's smile. "I have a proposition for you."

"A proposition...?" She asked nervously, the color draining from her face.

"No one here wants Sakura to find out Naruto was up wandering the halls, completely out of his mind and trying to get outside, right?" He asked, his voice dangerously smooth.

The nurse shook her head emphatically, her brown eyes wide and her pale blue braid swinging at her back.

"Good. Now, you are going to call up an ANBU escort using the access code HK-00-8-73. Then you are going to wait 10 minutes before you go clean up the mess down the hall, and we will both pretend that this whole night never. Even. Happened." He paused for a beat and tilted his head. "Did you get that?"

The woman nodded, backing out of the door and bolting down the hall. Kakashi sighed and felt a prick of guilt at scaring the nurse so much, but it passed rather swiftly and he leaned his head back against the bedframe. It wasn't more than five minutes before his window slid silently open and a familiar masked figure crouched on the sill like a gargoyle.

"Guard dogs always get the shit end of the stick, don't they," Kakashi said with a malicious wolfish grin. "Put him back to bed, and make sure he fucking *stays there.*"

"Understood, sir," the ANBU replied, his cloak rustling as he stepped down from his perch and walked to the bed.

The abnormally hot body was gingerly taken from his side, and Kakashi straightened out his blankets without so much as a glance at the ANBU and his cargo. He heard the door slide shut quietly, and he looked out at the night sky. At least the nurse might leave him and his open window alone now. He leaned back against the bedframe, closing his eye and trying to forget everything as he felt himself starting to drift off to sleep. The scent lingered in the air. The warmth lingered on his skin. ...damn you... It was nice.

Naruto's fever broke the next day, and according to Sakura he was slipping in and out of consciousness but remained incoherent about his surroundings. The kunoichi delivered all of Kakashi's 'meals' – which consisted of a cup of thick liquid that tasted like dirt and weeds – and gave him updates on the blonde's condition. The seals that were blocking his chakra, holding his organs hostage, and hampering their efforts at healing the wound in his chest were slowly becoming weaker. She liked to think that the medical staff was helping out with that, but they both knew the kyuubi was the one doing nearly all the work.

He lay back on his pillow and gazed out the open window at the darkening sky, thinking about the unexpected visit he'd had last night. If the one-sided conversation he'd heard was any indication, Kurama had deliberately led Naruto to his door. Fate and the fox were officially in cahoots. He cringed and rolled onto his side. It was a rather frightening notion, knowing those two powerful forces had come together to conspire against him for a brief moment. The only reason he could think of for the choice was that he had been the closest available person, and he didn't try to come up with any others.

Sleep eluded him for hours, regardless of how much he truly just wanted to sink into oblivion. Spitting out a curse, he struggled upright and swung his legs over the bed. The pinging in his bones had lessened, but he still felt like a gangly bunch of reeds woven together with old shoelaces and tied to withered half-rotted sticks. He propped a crutch under his arm and leaned forward out of bed. The smooth tile floor was cold under his bare feet.

There was nothing wrong with him going for a walk to ease the tension so he could go to sleep. There was nothing wrong with him wandering the halls aimlessly, restless and itching to be up and about after four days in bed. There was nothing wrong with him pausing to take a little break after hobbling around for an hour. There was nothing wrong with him staring at the door that led to the reason he was in the hospital.

"There is something very wrong with me..." Kakashi sighed quietly, reaching out and sliding the door to Naruto's room open. The nurse sitting in the chair next to the bed looked up from her book, a stern protest dying on her lips as her face blanched. "Ah, you came prepared tonight," he said, his eyebrows lifting in surprise at the basket of food and drink setting on the side table.

"Kakashi-san," she said hurriedly, jumping to her feet. "About last night, I swear to you none of his read-outs had given any indication that he would-"

"I know, I know," he interrupted, raising his hand in a placating manner. "He's as unpredictable as they come, it's not your fault. Go on, take a break for an hour," he shrugged,

giving her an understanding and somewhat apologetic smile. "I can't sleep anyway."

"I..." She stopped herself with a sigh and gave him a grateful smile, nodding as she picked up her basket of late-night snacks and cans of tea. "Thank you."

He didn't sit down after she closed the door behind her, standing there for a few minutes and leaning heavily against his crutch. The air in the room smelled oxygen-rich, almost sterile, and the vase on the bedside table was filled with colorful paper flowers instead of real ones. The head of the bed was raised at an angle, propping Naruto up in a reclined position and taking most of the pressure off his lungs. His arms were resting on top of the white sheet, an IV line taped to one.

Naruto was still pale, but the flush had gone from his cheeks and Kakashi could tell his breathing was slightly less harsh than the night before, muffled as it was beneath the clear plastic mask covering his nose and mouth. The blonde's face was hauntingly peaceful, as serene and eerie as an ocean that had suddenly gone as still as glass. Kakashi had been on enough missions with Naruto to know that he slept with the same amount of flailing enthusiasm as he had when he was awake. He found his eye constantly drawn down to the young man's chest, checking the steady rise and fall before looking back up at his face.

"Why did you come to my room last night? I didn't want you there." ...liar... "Don't ever do that again," he said softly, sitting down in the empty chair and leaning his crutch on the wall.

Naruto remained as quiet as a doll, and Kakashi hated it. There wasn't even a faint smile or grimace on the young man's face, not a twitch of his eyebrows, no drool, no mumbling, no snoring, no restless shifting, no nothing! The intense urge to just grab Naruto's shoulders and shake him awake had him clutching at the edge of the bed. He tried to hold onto his simmering anger, but he couldn't. He'd seen this other-worldly calm before, and his own words echoed through his head like the cackling howl of a demon. 'Was your fate inevitably death?'

"Please," he whispered, curling his arm on the sheet next to Naruto's hand and resting his head in the crook of his elbow. "Promise me..." He reached up and hovered his fingers a hair's breadth from the blonde's cheek. "Don't ever do that again."

Kakashi let his hand fall down to the mattress. He was despicable. Twice now he'd conjured up excuses to get close, to hold him when he knew it was safe...when he knew the blonde would never remember it. He could have propped Naruto against his shoulder *next* to him on that mountain as he had waited for Sai, but he didn't. He could have gotten on his damn crutches and bellowed for the nurse when he first heard the scratching at his door last night, but he didn't.

And there he was, *again*, reaching out for one last touch like a drug addict itching for a hit before the stash was taken away. Going on like this was not an option, he had to stop! He had to stop wanting something he couldn't have! Fuck, *'couldn't'*?! The word was *'wouldn't'! WOULD **NOT**!* Semantics were very important in situations like this, it meant the difference between real acceptance and just placating yourself.

He cherished the boisterous punk. He had for years, as much as he hated to admit it. Naruto had an uncanny talent for breaking all the rules, including the one Kakashi had for himself about not getting too attached to people. First of all, if you get too close you start making mistakes on the battlefield. You stop to think when you should act, and you act when you should stop to think. He couldn't just pass off his screw-up in that cave as a result of desperation and exhaustion.

Kakashi had been ordered to capture all of the enemy alive, if possible, but he hadn't even attempted it right from the start. The second that creature had tried to take Naruto away from him he'd ripped the man apart with his teeth. He turned his head, closing his eye and pressing his face into the muscle of his forearm as he shivered in sickening delight at the memory. There would never be a time he would regret that moment, and it disgusted him. Still, with some time alone and a little work he knew he could again hone himself down so he wasn't a liability in the field.

It was the other side of the coin that was the real problem; the side that had all the potential in the world to drive Naruto away from him forever in the blink of an eye. The memory of chasing the fool down after he'd jumped off a damn cliff when Kakashi had said a perfectly innocent comment was still quite clear. And now, the tables had been turned on him at the worst possible moment during what was apparently a mid-life crisis. He was trying to read too much into the events that had occurred recently, and there was simply no way reality had flipped upside-down like that.

He had to think about everything from a clear objective viewpoint. Last night Naruto had been so completely out of his head he might as well have been someone else. Besides, in a strictly logical sense, being able to cuddle up to something cool when your flesh feels like it's melting off your bones literally does feel very nice. He knew that all too well, and the Jounin couldn't really fault him for that one.

Before that, Naruto had been clawing at death's door when he'd let that stupid comment about his eyes slip out. According to Ibiki – who, by the way, he was still insanely envious of –, the man Naruto had attacked had kept him sedated and under genjutsu for days at a time to try to crack Ino's blocks. When Naruto had been awake, the man had been breaking him down mentally to try to find a backdoor past the blocks. After going through that kind of hell, irrational things whispered through a haze of blood and pain were better off forgotten.

The fact was, Kakashi doubted Naruto would remember either incident anyway, so there was nothing lost. He found himself wincing, relief and regret winding into a painful knot in his chest. Getting rid of the feelings infecting his mind and body might not be possible, but the Jounin was absolutely confident he could bury them so deep they would never see the light of day. He'd been doing that his whole life, he was simply a little out of practice.

He had to make this the last time he would ever yearn to be more than an arm's length away from Naruto, both physically and emotionally. If he didn't step back he would lose it all. He had to let go of everything and rebuild the walls from the ground up, they were in shambles. He was going to put a stop to the insanity tonight, and he'd make the mortar out of the memories so the wall would never break again.

Kakashi took a deep breath and forced himself to relax, inhaling that warm scent and relishing it. ...this is the last time... The warmth settled into his chest and eased the pain, spreading out and sinking into his aching bones. ...I will always be here for you, just like I always have been... He felt himself sagging into the mattress as his muscles were drained of tension. ...I will never push you away and I will never pull you close... Sleep was dragging him down with slow deliberation and he didn't fight it. ...I will never let you in again... He wasn't certain, but he thought he felt something brush against his hair, gently coaxing him farther into the darkness that wrapped around him. ...I am going to beat the shit out of you when this is over...

Naruto looked down at Kakashi with a small weary smile, sliding his half-numb fingers carefully through the silver hair like a kid sneaking a piece of candy while no one was looking. It was impulsive and reckless, but he was far too tired to care at the moment. The overwhelming joy and relief of opening his eyes to the blurry lines and shapes of a hospital room had been heavenly, but seeing the Jounin there as well, healthy and whole, was euphoric. It had seemed too much like a dream with most of his body feeling muted and completely removed, he'd had to make sure it was all really happening.

That had been the original plan, at any rate, but simply touching Kakashi made his own existence feel so delightfully real and solid. He didn't want to stop, unaccountably afraid of the possibility that it would all disappear if he didn't have that contact. He wished he could curl up and bury his face in the wild silver hair just to get close enough to hear Kakashi breathe, because that might somehow ease the suffocating aching pressure in his chest that was keeping his breath short and shallow. Well, that wasn't going to happen. He couldn't move anything besides his hand, so he consoled himself with just enjoying the wiry texture slipping between his fingers and tickling his palm.

He wasn't aware of time passing. It was as if the world had come to a standstill, and he was hovering in limbo between being awake and fading off to sleep. At some point it occurred to him to wonder what Kakashi was doing there in the first place. It was pretty obvious the man was exhausted. He glanced up at the clock, squinting for a few seconds to get it in focus, and then scowled. It was almost 2:00 in the morning, what the hell was Kakashi doing in his room?! He should be asleep in his own bed! How long had he been there?!

The door opened quietly, and Naruto turned his angry gaze on the nurse frozen in the doorway. He had to concentrate on focusing his eyes again, and by the time he could see her face clearly his irritation fell away. The poor woman looked like she was on the verge of tears, and he couldn't quite read her expression. Startled at her reaction, he almost called out to her as she sagged in weary defeat, stepped back, and closed the door.

Thoroughly confused, he blinked at the door and let it swim out of focus. It was giving him a headache trying to concentrate anyway, and he stopped forcing his mind to attempt figuring out what the heck was going on. He'd find out in the morning. His brain would be clearer then. Closing his eyes and continuing to luxuriate in the feel of Kakashi's hair, he easily slipped into his subconscious. It was a little too easy, actually, and he almost went right past it into 'unconscious'.

Something wrapped tightly around him to halt his progress as he melted through the darkness. He couldn't see anything beyond the red eyes glowing dimly behind a row of darkly shadowed bars. It was as if the box he'd been trapped in before had expanded and dissolved, turning his subconscious into a murky tar pit. He dangled there for a moment, blinking and trying to keep himself from fading away like mist in the sun. It was a lot more difficult maintaining his awareness separately in two places at once than he'd anticipated.

Everything felt like it was merging into one surreal existence, and the only thing tethering him to reality was the soft rope of fur around his waist.

Don't...don't let go... Naruto gasped, fumbling to get his fingers into the right position on his stomach.

I won't, Kurama's deep voice rumbled softly.

Finally getting his hazy brain to activate the key, he let his arms drop limply at the ratcheting sound of the seal being unlocked and the gate swinging open. Whether he was pulled in or Kurama came out, he didn't know or care. He was bundled onto a fluffy bed of fur like a fragile tattered rag doll, dimly aware of the fox curling around him as Kurama folded his front paws and rested his chin on his tails.

I'm sorry... Naruto said quietly, the physical world and his subconscious separating into their own comfortable realities as the familiar tingling heat of Kurama's chakra threaded into his heavy sore body.

Go to sleep, stupid brat, Kurama sighed, his words vibrating through Naruto where he lay tucked against the fox's side. *We can argue about it when you have the strength to at least attempt to fight back against the unholy ass-kicking I'm going to give you.*

I missed you too, old fleabag, Naruto grinned, wriggling his shoulders deeper into the warm fur while he twined his fingers around Kakashi's hair.

You know, you really do have a bad habit of taking in dangerous wild animals, he chuckled, flicking his ears absently and gazing out beyond the black walls.

You make it sound like I live in a zoo. I have you and a bunch of plants, Naruto mumbled sleepily, his eyelids getting too heavy to hold up and his hand too numb to move.

Yeah, just keep telling yourself that, Kurama said wryly.

Naruto wanted to keep talking, but he couldn't muster the energy as the darkness closed in around him.

The following days were a blur of lethargy and Sakura's medicine, which consisted of a brownish-grey semi-liquid that may or may not have had its origins at the bottom of a swamp. Sprinkled into what ended up feeling like one really really long day were occasional visits from Iruka. While Naruto would've liked to have at least gotten a quick 'hello, how're you doing' from one of his friends or Kakashi, he always seemed to forget that as soon as

Iruka arrived. The Academy teacher had a skillful knack for prattling on with amusing stories that

distracted the blonde from the cloister of mostly undefined things that made him feel bad in general.

Then one morning he finally woke up. Total awareness sank into his bones and warmed his skin until he could feel every last inch of himself without the lingering numbness he'd become accustomed to. He wasn't wearing the plastic mask, and he could feel the air entering his lungs, scratching only a bit harshly on one side, expanding, then sighing out as if in satisfaction. Hard little stones of mild discomfort nested in specific areas, but it wasn't anything he couldn't ignore.

He could feel the restless energy starting to prickle at his nerves, and for the first time in what felt like forever his mind was absolutely clear. No drowsiness, no haze, no drifting from thought to random thought because he couldn't seem to focus. He knew what time it was without looking at the clock, gazing instead at the pastel clouds and pale blue sky outside the closed window. He flexed his fingers and stretched his arms up above his head, wincing at the uncomfortable knots burrowing in his torso.

There were five of them, and he didn't have to look down to know exactly what the pains were. Still, he did, pulling up the bottom of his shirt and brushing his fingers over the exposed skin between his bandages and the waistband of his pajamas. He lifted his eyebrows at the sight, surprised and more than a little pleased. What he could see of Kurama's seal was a rich black inky color, but the two angular shapes on either side were a pale ghostly grey. He tried gathering chakra, and immediately felt something smack the side of his head within his subconscious. His concentration was easily broken, and he turned his attention inward.

What the heck was that for?! Naruto demanded, rubbing the side of his head. He was still laying against the fox's side, and the black tar draped around the room had faded to a translucent mist.

That was for trying to mess up all my hard work, Kurama said, darting a meaningful glance at Naruto. *Stop rushing things, I'm not done patching you back together yet.*

You're burning through them pretty quickly, though, Naruto mused, scratching at the faded seals in impatience.

'*Quickly'...?* Kurama hissed with quiet venom, slowly lifting his head from his folded paws and arching his neck like a snake getting ready to strike.

Well, yeah, it must've taken you no time to break the tori-

The one's you pinned me with took a day, he said darkly,

flattening his ears.

And the ones I put-

Those took six more days due to the interference from that bastard's seals, Kurama interrupted again waspishly.

Wow, so they were still in place when I got back-

No, I broke them before that.

Wait, what? But I was only out there for two or three-

Try ten! Kurama snapped heatedly, flashing his sharp teeth.

...what? Naruto whispered, his eyes widening.

Ten. Days. *I was trapped in the dark for* ***ten days*** *thanks to your god damned stupidity!* The fox said wrathfully, his tails whipping behind him. *All I knew was that there was someone out there who wanted to fucking eat you, another who kept on bashing a genjutsu into your shit-for-brains, and a third who just plain wanted you dead! And guess what?!* ***They almost succeeded!*** He lowered his head to fix a furious look at Naruto. *Would you care to take a wild stab at* ***why*** *they almost succeeded?*

The third was a sensory-type, it was the only way he'd know I was a shinobi right off the bat! He was draining my chakra, he would have found out about you! Naruto said defensively, cutting his hand through the air. *I couldn't let them know-*

DON'T YOU DARE GIVE ME THAT BULLSHIT, YOU BRAINLESS PUNK! Kurama roared, snaking a tail around the blonde and slinking into a crouch so he could level a baleful glare at the young man dangling in front of him. *Did it never occur to you that maybe* ***I*** *could have done something to keep them from sensing me if you'd given me the chance?!*

But you've never-

Because I've never needed to! Kurama spat, baring his fangs. *Just what the fuck do you take me for?! Who the hell do you think I am?!* ***I AM THE GOD DAMNED KYUUBI! THE STRONGEST OF THE BIJU!*** *I am not some wilting flower that needs to be fucking protected! It is my job to protect* ***you****, and you took any chance in hell I had of doing that one simple task away from me like I was a nuisance that would get in your way!*

Just a damn minute! Naruto shouted angrily. *I never thought of you as-*

I'm not finished, yet, Kurama snarled, digging his claws into the floor. *I could have dealt with being locked behind the Yondaime's gate, but you took it a step too far by completely cutting me the fuck off! I wasted* ***a week*** *busting up tori gates that didn't even need to be there! That bastard's seals would have been an obstacle anyway, but without your suicidal meddling I could have gotten chakra to you* ***before*** *you were out of reach, kicking in the shinigami's front door and demanding he carry you to the afterlife!*

I was only able to get through to your sorry half-dead ass because – by some ***miracle*** *– you flipped your shit which allowed me to resonate with your god damned rage!* He railed, scratching deep furrows in the floor. *And what did you do?!* ***YOU JUMPED ON ONE OF***

THE ASSHOLES LIKE A DAY-OLD ROOKIE AND GOT A HOLE PUNCHED THROUGH YOUR FUCKING CHEST! *I couldn't get you to hear me! I couldn't see what was going on! I couldn't heal you!* ***I couldn't do anything at all because you left me the fuck behind!***

Naruto could feel his body tensing up to an almost unbearable level, his fingernails digging painfully into his palms. He wanted to kick and thrash and writhe and shout and fight! He wanted to FIGHT! He wanted to fight because his impromptu plan hadn't gone the way he'd thought it would, and more than seven days had been stolen from him when he let his guard down, and Kurama had been trapped in the dark. He wanted to fight because he hated that all of his guilty anger was biting and clawing and scratching and tearing and he *hadn't* left Kurama behind and it was still all his fault and HE WANTED TO FIGHT!

Pulling his lips back, he sucked air between his teeth and forced himself to remain silent. He mentally hauled himself back by the scruff of his neck and swallowed everything. All of it. Every last word Kurama had lashed at him was digested and kept down with the same horrible gagging sensation as Sakura's medicine. Only this time it was a thousand times worse. He took several deep breaths and straightened his shoulders, licking his lips and raising his chin to look resolutely at the irate fox.

I won't regret my decision, he said with a firm clear voice, feeling the steel solidify in his bones. *It was reckless to have gone so far as to block you out entirely, and for that I'm truly sorry. It was the only option I saw at the time to try to keep my identity a secret, and to keep them from finding you. I never intended to leave you behind. I'll listen to you next time, and I'll do everything in my power to make a better decision, but I'm not perfect. I can't promise it won't happen again.*

Kurama arched his neck back slowly, narrowing his eyes as if pondering whether or not to strike out with his teeth. The fires of anger cooled to hot embers in the fox's glowing eyes, and Naruto had the impression of staring into something both ageless and ancient. He never thought of Kurama as old, and he often forgot how many centuries the fox had actually been alive. A twinge of sadness pushed past the lingering sparks of his temper, and he was suddenly aware of his own incomprehensible insignificance in the face of all that time stored within the Biju.

I really need to let you out more... Naruto said softly.

Ugh, save me, Kurama groaned, rolling his eyes and sagging his shoulders in disgust. *I refuse to go back to that ridiculous conversation, so don't even start. And stop giving me that simpering holier-than-thou expression, we are having an argument here!*

Simpering?! Naruto sputtered resentfully.

God, I hate you. You have the most irritating way of pulling the fangs out of a perfectly good fight! The fox snapped, flumping down to plop his chin on top of his folded arms and shoving the blonde into the thick fur on his back. *If you truly have the balls to say you won't back down from the decisions you made out there, then you better be prepared to face the consequences when you get out of the hospital.*

...meaning, the unholy ass-kicking I'm going to get from you isn't happening today? Naruto asked hesitantly, and a bit confused. He could feel the warm familiar chakra threading back into him as he sat on the piled fur, easing the aches that had started to knot into his torso beneath the faded seals.

You can't even mold chakra properly yet, it would be like kicking a sick puppy, Kurama said derisively, flicking his ear in a dismissive manner. *Besides, it'll probably be more effective if I leave your thrashing to someone else.*

Like who?!

Who knows, Kurama grunted and shrugged, a small darkly amused smile tugging at his expression. *But I'm going to enjoy watching you squirm.*

Naruto narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to demand some information, but then shut it again promptly. He knew Kurama wasn't going to tell him. He was having too much fun being subtle and evasive, leaving Naruto to stew over his words and wonder what the fox knew that he didn't.

Leaving his subconscious in a sulk, he looked at the window and considered the risk versus reward of crawling out of bed and opening it. No one had told him not to open it, and as he wiggled his toes experimentally he thought he could probably wobble his way over there and back in a fair amount of time. Unfortunately, if he got caught in the act he might have hell to pay, and if the window wasn't supposed to be open at all they might nail it shut.

He sighed and decided it wouldn't kill him to wait and ask Sakura directly. Letting his bored gaze drift around the room, he noticed the vase of paper flowers on his bedside table and picked up the folded card of white paper in front of it curiously. He suspected the neat script on the inside was Ino's, but there was no signature. 'DO NOT WATER THESE FLOWERS!' Rolling his eyes, he was now certain Ino had written the card.

'I'm sorry this was all that could be put on your table, but real flowers aren't allowed in your room. It's your own fault for coming back with a lung injury.' Pausing again, he gave the flowers a flat look and wondered if he should continue reading, or just stop while he was somewhat ahead with the vague apology. Shaking his head, he looked back at the card. 'There are a lot of people out here that would like to wish you well. There are even more that would like to beat you to a bloody pulp for scaring them like you did.' Damn it! Should have stopped at the first sentence.

'We love you, even if you are a stupid, tasteless, impulsive, rude, immature, loud, reckless, nosy, clueless, stubborn, thick-headed fool. Don't ever do that to us again. Get well soon!' Okay, that was a hell of a laundry list, but at least they love him? Sort of? He didn't have much time to mull over the juxtaposition of being thoroughly scolded, insulted, threatened, apologized to, and then metaphorically hugged, because Sakura knocked on the door and stepped inside with another cup of liquid anguish for him to choke down.

He figured he'd have to do some pretty fast talking to get her to stay and keep him company with as busy as she always was. So, as soon as he caught his breath from guzzling the offered water to chase the foul taste of the medicine away he started firing off questions. How long

had he been in the hospital? How long would he have to stay? When could he go outside? How was Kakashi-sensei doing? Had he been released yet? Could he have the window open? When could he start eating real food, cause that stuff tasted like shi-

"Enough!" Sakura practically wailed, digging an apple out of her pocket and shoving it into the blonde's mouth to shut him up. "Will you just pipe down for a few seconds and let me get a word in edgewise?! Geeze," she sighed in exasperation, walking over to open the window before leaning against the sill. "I'm glad you're starting to recover, but keep the energy output levels to a minimum."

"Sorry," he said, setting the card aside and sinking back into the mattress as he crunched on the fruit. The cool morning breeze was more refreshing than Naruto ever thought possible, and he found himself breathing it in as if he were drinking a heady brew of something deliciously intoxicating and comforting. It smelled like *home.*

"You've been here for a little over a week, and you are *staying* here until I say otherwise. *That is final*," Sakura said sternly, watching his face with clinical scrutiny. "There's really no way of telling how much longer you'll be here with the way you heal, and you are absolutely ***forbidden*** from molding chakra until those seals have been completely dissolved. Got it?"

"Yes ma'am," Naruto said meekly around a mouthful of apple, repeating to himself over and over again that he needed to actually listen this time. Because if he didn't, not only would he be denied the simple pleasure of an apple, but the medicine he'd have to drink would probably destroy the very fabric of reality by getting a lot more horrible tasting. And, he kind of liked not having broken legs. Seriously, it was unbelievably unfair that Sakura was the head of the medical staff...

"Good," she nodded. "Kakashi-sensei was released two days ago, but he's on light duty for a few more days until he completely recovers. I asked him if he wanted to see you, but he said he'd wait till you were out of the hospital," she said thoughtfully, tilting her head. "He had that smile on his face, too. The one he puts on when he's brushing people off. I think he's still upset with you for getting yourself hurt."

"Him and everyone else, apparently," he groused, gnawing somewhat petulantly on the stem of the apple and looking at his feet.

"Do you remember it?" Sakura asked neutrally.

"Mmm...it's hazy. Kakashi-sensei was fighting one of them," Naruto scowled, trying to dig up the memory into a sharper clarity than the fuzzy broken pieces it wanted to stay in. For some reason saying Eito or Jin's names aloud was too repulsive a thought for him to bear. "And I was on the floor, I think. Then..." He narrowed his eyes, following the emotions that skittered alongside the images to try to sew everything back together.

"Then the other one came in, and..." His heart started to beat faster without him knowing quite why, yet, and he absently rubbed at his chest. He could feel the bandages underneath his shirt. "And his hands were...changing to black..." The complete recollection of that moment slammed into him like a sledgehammer, horrifyingly vivid and crystal clear.

He could smell it; the tang of blood thick in the air, muddled with the scent of filth and decay that drifted from the opposite corner, but over it all something pungent and musky that smelled like every wild sharp-fanged thing that stalked prey from the shadows.

He could see it; a small dimly lit rough-hewn cave, a body crumpled awkwardly against the wall and laying in a pool of dark liquid, Kakashi's savage eyes *starving* for the kill that was only a few seconds away while his exhausted body fought to obey his bloodlust, Eito bleeding and desperately trying to drive the Jounin away from him, Jin stepping forward with hands as black as ink and red patterns on his palms, reaching for Kakashi's back.

He could hear it; the enraged maddened shrieking roaring howls of two voices echoing in his head-

Something cracked across Naruto's face, and he choked off a scream as he blinked at the open window. A scream? His throat was raw and he was gasping for air, hunched over with his hands gripping fabric so tight he could still feel his nails digging painfully into his palms. What happened? His chest hurt like there were burning hot lines across his skin, and he couldn't seem to stop shaking like a cheap wind-up toy. A warm arm snaked around his shoulders and pulled him in, resting his sore cheek against soft fabric that smelled like soap and cherry blossoms.

"It's okay, you're home now," Sakura's voice soothed, her hand rubbing gently at his back. "Kakashi-sensei is safe, and you're safe, and everyone's home now."

"I...I know that," Naruto replied in a hoarse wobbly voice. Why was it wobbly? His vision swam and he blinked, confused as to why he was suddenly crying. What was going on?! "I saw him!" He said, not liking the way his voice pitched up and broke, but unable to stop babbling in that stupid voice. "Kakashi-sensei was in my room, and he was asleep, and he looked so *tired*, and a nurse opened the door, and then *she* looked tired, and she left, and Kakashi-sensei was still asleep, and I let Kurama out, and then *I* fell asleep, and...and...*and I'm not **crying**, damn it!"* He insisted, yanking his hands free of where they seemed to be caught in his shirt and scrubbing at his face without pulling away from that comforting embrace.

"Of course you aren't," Sakura sniffed with a weak laugh, her voice wavering slightly. "We're adults now, and strong shinobi. We don't cry over stuff like this, right?"

"Right," he said, putting as much cheerful conviction behind the lie as he could while he took deep breaths to collect himself. "Hey, Sakura-chan, do you think I could go outside today?" It was suddenly the most important thing on the face of the planet that he get out of that room, out of the hospital, away from the sterile oppressive walls.

"Only for a little while," she sighed, giving his back a pat before standing up to walk to the small closet on the other side of the room. "Iruka-sensei said he was going to come by later this morning, so I suppose it's all right if he takes you out to the courtyard. But first, arms up," she said briskly, marching toward him with a shirt in one hand and a small box of bandages in the other. She was all business again.

"Eh?" Naruto looked down, startled at the torn fabric draped raggedly over the scratches on his chest. "Ow!" He protested as the back of his shirt was surreptitiously hauled over his head and buttons scraped his chin and nose, prompting him to lift his arms and wriggle out of the clothing.

"I told you to put your arms up," she said archly, brushing her green glowing fingers over the new scratches and making them vanish without a trace. It was odd the way he had the impression she was trying to erase everything that had happened along with the shallow injuries. She set both shirts aside, sitting on the edge of the bed to unwind the bandages from around his chest. "The kyuubi's making short work of these seals," she mused, pressing her fingertips to the pale ghostly marks on his bare torso. "You might just be out of here in a week if you behave yourself."

"Really?!" He asked hopefully, watching her hands. His bright smile tilted to something like amusement, fully aware of his lack of jittery butterflies at his childhood crush's touch. It was an astonishingly good feeling to be able to honestly say in the back of his mind that it was better this way.

"I said *'might'*," Sakura growled pointedly, darting a fearsome glare at him before returning to her examination. "Damn it, this one will probably leave a scar." She rested her brightly glowing palm on the area of pinked and silvered skin that was bordered by one of the faint marks. Her expression was piqued and severe, as if the idea of a scar was a personal insult to her.

"Ah, it's okay. It makes me feel kind of...well, normal," Naruto shrugged with a chuckle, which swiftly changed to a broad uncomfortable smile at Sakura's dark look. "But, hey, if you can get rid of it, that would be even better than normal! It'd be fantastic!"

She gave him a dry little 'hmph' and taped a square of gauze over the newly healed skin, then grimaced and poked him in the ribs. "You're too skinny."

"Then let me *eat*," he retorted, taking the fresh shirt she handed him and shoving his arms into the sleeves. "I haven't had a real meal in over a month!"

"Are you hungry?"

"Of course I'm-" He paused abruptly, pushing the last button through its designated hole and resting his palms on his stomach. It was weird that he wasn't ravenous, when he knew he should be. "...sort of hungry. I could definitely eat something, though."

"I'll tell Iruka-sensei to bring you a light meal, then," Sakura said, putting the box of supplies back in the closet and tossing the dirty shirt into the hamper.

"Miso ramen?" Naruto suggested helpfully.

"It'll be mashed beets if you keep it up," she smiled sweetly as she walked out the door and closed it behind her.

Naruto shivered and cringed. After a few minutes of being alone in the silent room, his thoughts started drifting. He didn't want to go back to that unnervingly vivid memory, but he knew he needed to face it as well as everything that had happened prior to it. Pulling his knees up, he buried his face in them and slung his arms over his head in frustration. There was too much he had to process about the entire mission, he didn't know where to start!

First of all, there was the whole crazy dream incident which was *so obviously a result of that damn drug!* And yet, there he sat, still not wanting to run away screaming, and kind of wondering if he was ever going to have another—HOLY SHIT STOP RIGHT THERE! He squirreled deeper into his knees and plucked angrily at his shirt sleeves. But not only that, thoughts of Kakashi had been his saving grace *and* his greatest weakness when Jin was screwing with his head. What the hell was he supposed to even think of that?! Was it good? Was it bad? Was it both? Was it neither?

It made absolute sense that his mind had circled around Kakashi while he was captured, because that's who was going to come get him. When he knuckled down to review those last memories, careful not to get dragged back into the overwhelming force of the short span of time that was as clear as if he was still there, he came back confused. There was a writhing bundle of emotions twisted into the images, but in the end he had been elated.

Of course he'd been elated, he'd just been rescued from hell! So...why did it feel like there was more to it than that? He couldn't recall much of the end before he passed out, only brief foggy glimpses of Kakashi's eyes. There had been a desperate fear in the Jounin's eye at one point, and it made Naruto want to shrivel up in a dark corner and cry. Then, there had been both eyes watching him carefully, almost sadly, and he held onto that image. He'd never actually thought about it before, but the man did have nice eyes.

Naruto felt his heart flutter, and he reared back into the mattress as if he could somehow crawl right out of his skin and away from his body. *What the fuck was **that** all about?!* Was he seriously *feeling* these things?! Was he seriously *thinking* these things?! OH MY GOD, WAS HE SERIOUSLY **CRUSHING ON HIS SENSEI?!** *What the hell was going on?!* This wasn't good. This was so out of the realm of 'not good' it shot right past 'bad' to a definition that didn't even have a proper name!

He had to figure out how to not be...*being* like this, and fast! How on god's green earth was he going to find a way to stop caring about the man he *already* cared so much for without actually stopping caring about him?! It was completely backwards from his crush on Sakura, he couldn't just get to know Kakashi over a span of years and let that fix things. He already knew him! Well...as much as the Jounin would let people get to know him. What was he supposed to do about this?! Did he even want to do anything about it?!

"Okay," Naruto said flatly, glowering at the wall. "Yes, you do want to, damn it, because this is the dumbest thing to ever cross your mind since that time you thought that stuff in the science lab at the Academy was candy! Do you even remember the following three days?! No! You don't! THAT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE DUMB! If you're stupid enough to get yourself into this mess, then you will find a brilliantly stupid way of getting yourself out of it! Now figure it out!"

However, for all his ordering himself to get himself out of the mess he'd gotten himself into, he couldn't come up with a viable solution in the hours before Iruka arrived. By the time his former teacher showed up he felt frazzled and drained, and all he wanted to do was pour his heart out. But that was simply not an option. He couldn't talk to *anyone* about his problem!

His turmoil was either clearly written on his face, or Iruka was just worried about him being in the hospital, because the man practically carried him outside and did everything in his power to distract Naruto with a constant stream of talking and a delectable bribe of miso soup. Personally, Naruto suspected both, and let himself get lost in the amusing stories of Iruka's never ending trials and tribulations at the Academy and the Mission Assignment Desk. Unfortunately, the fragile peace of mind was shattered when Iruka literally did have to carry him back to his room, and all Naruto could think of was how Kakashi was taller and more of a comfortable fit...

Four days passed with a great amount of success on the seals being completely banished, a moderate amount of success on his strength recovery, a small amount of success on his weight gain, and no success on his woeful troubles. He was released on his own recognisance, a crutch forcefully shoved under his arm and a strict dietary menu pinned to his shirt. He made a show of using the crutch when he left the hospital to appease Sakura, but by the time he reached his front door he was leaning heavily on the damn thing and hating every second of it.

Flopping onto his bed, he flung the detestable wooden implement aside and cussed heartily at himself for being so out of shape. This was no good. He looked over the list of things he was supposed to be eating and grimaced. Fruit, vegetables, blah, blah, blah...oh! There was a note at the bottom allowing him Ichiraku once every other day for the next week, on the condition that he did not eat instant ramen at home.

He was out of his bed and stumbling toward the cupboards in his kitchen in a flash, dread creeping up his spine. They were empty. Shit, all his cup ramen had been confiscated! He opened the fridge and sank to his knees in defeat. So much green. So much GREEN! He liked *growing* plants, not *eating* them! He needed to find out who'd stocked his fridge with all that greenery, and give them an elbow to the face.

Naruto snatched up a cucumber and crunched on it vengefully. He was too hungry to not eat, and he didn't want to go limping around Konoha in search of something more appetizing. He still had *some* pride. Letting out a sigh, he scowled at the half-eaten vegetable and almost chucked it out the window. It reminded him of how Kakashi was always harping on him about eating better. Things were getting downright ridiculous the way everything reminded him of Kakashi in one form or fashion, and the more he tried to stop himself from thinking about the Jounin the more his brain kept slapping him with memories!

Well, fine, if not thinking about him wasn't working, maybe he should try thinking about nothing but him and burn himself out so he could feel like a normally functioning person again. Sinking his teeth into the cucumber, he reached under the bed and pulled out a shoebox. He handled it carefully, setting it on the bed and crossing his legs so he was facing the window. As he rested his hands on the sides of the lid he paused, wondering if this was a

good idea or a bad idea. After a few seconds, he shrugged and took the lid off. Good or bad, it was the only idea he had at the moment.

The ceramic mask smirked at him, the few hairline fractures along the surface making it appear more like a living thing and less like the inanimate object it was. Naruto picked it up gingerly and inspected it, not that he expected to find a scrap of dirt on the thing after he'd spent hours cleaning it so meticulously. Tracing the red paint bordering the sharply tilted eyes with his fingers, he wondered what those eyes had seen so many years ago.

He swallowed the last of his snack and hesitated briefly before putting the mask on, holding it in place instead of using chakra to keep it there like one was supposed to do. It still smelled a little like seaweed. While two days of searching didn't sound like a long time, he and his army of clones had literally scoured every inch of the river bottom until he'd found it. He smiled and eased down to lay on his back, peering at the ceiling through the eye holes of the mask. Kakashi was such a goofy romantic deep down.

What better place to walk away from your past than the Valley of the End? Naruto sighed and closed his eyes. Someone else had done that as well...only the location had been designed by Fate, and Sasuke had walked away on the opposite side of the river. It felt strange thinking that the mask had been down there watching everything the entire time, and in the end Kakashi had been the one to pick him up and carry him home.

"What other things have you seen?" He asked, his voice sounding slightly hollow and muffled as he lifted his hands above his face to look at them. "Horrible things, probably. You've seen the stuff nightmares are made of, and yet you still smirk as if it's all one big secret joke that only you know the punch line to. Do you laugh at death or because of it? Or are you laughing at me because I can't stop wanting to see the world through his eyes? ...or because I can't stop needing him to see the world through mine?"

Naruto dropped his hands to his chest, drumming his fingers on the lean muscle. "What was it like back then? Did he smile with you, or did you hide the pain? Did you ever get to hear him laugh?" He paused and rolled his eyes. "Did he ever completely lose his marbles and start talking to you like you could actually hear him? I wonder what he looked like in his uniform." A subtle shiver twitched across his skin at the image his mind conjured up, and he felt a warmth begin to seep into his blood. "Right, I think that's enough crazy for one afternoon," he said quickly, taking the mask off and setting it gently back into its box.

He couldn't quite bring himself to shove the box back under his bed, so he placed it on his bedside table and moved the small plant he'd had there to sit next to his old team photo on the narrow shelf above his headboard. Dinner that night was a trial he was not looking forward to repeating, but at least the rice came out fine and he went to bed with a full stomach. Of all the tangled thoughts crowding his head as he drifted off to sleep, there was one that was an absolutely uncontested fact and necessity; he was going to need to buy a lot more soy sauce.

Cause I Had Laid My Trap for You, but it Seems That I Got Caught

Chapter Notes

WARNING!! Okay, so there's a shower scene near the end that has a moment of...oh, shall we say 'self-discovery'? You may or may not want to read that particular scene. So, to help you get through this harrowing event I present to you my first installment of The Friendly Neighborhood Yaoi Survival Guide.

Here's what you do: As soon as you see the word 'shower', start reading with caution! When you begin to feel uncomfortable, go ahead and scroll like there's no tomorrow. Once you spot dialogue you can read again in relative safety. Good luck, trooper! =D

Haiku (c) Kobayashi Issa and Soseki Natsume

Cause I Had Laid My Trap for You, but it Seems That I Got Caught

It was two days after Naruto was released from the hospital that he was ambushed by Kiba and Akamaru while he was out shopping for possible soy sauce alternatives. Before he could even begin to ask why the pair were bandaged up, he was slung over Akamaru's back like a sack of flour and hauled to Yakiniku Q. All his peers were there to greet him; Chouji, Tenten, Sai, everyone! And they were looking far too pleased with themselves for the amount of injuries they were sporting.

His immediate demand for answers was met with a plate of food, an empty seat, and five different people talking at once. It took him a minute to sift through the initial barrage of information, but when he finally caught onto what they were talking about he almost choked on his meal. They'd been dispatched to Iwa and Suna to assist in the final phase of taking down the kidnapping ring.

Considering ALL of them had been sent out, he highly suspected that 'dispatched' wasn't quite the right term for what had probably been an outright threat to leave on their own if they didn't get permission. They also had that subtly mischievous self-satisfied air of having gotten away with murder. He couldn't really blame them for wanting a piece of the action, because he may or may not have done some bragging about being part of an S-rank mission before he'd left... Well, it did at least explain why they hadn't been around to pester him while he was in the hospital.

Lunch turned into something of a raucous celebration party which steamrolled its way into dinner. He'd gone through hell in every way imaginable to succeed at that damn mission, and he refused to let any of them out of his sight until he squeezed every last detail out of them. Thankfully, they were more than willing to weave their tales; boasting, teasing, and

interrupting to 'correct' each other. It was deliciously nostalgic being there with everyone beat up and bright-eyed, still coasting on a high of adrenaline after a job well done, and he ate it all up with avaricious delight.

With everyone back in town and stuck off the active duty list along with him, he found it immensely easy to distract himself from histroubling obsession over a certain Jounin. He was so disgustingly out of shape it wasn't funny, and even with his partner injured he was barely able to keep up with routine training at first. However, with the seals binding him gone his recovery rate started kicking back into gear, and he could feel the progress day by day. It was just too bad he wasn't gaining weight as quickly as he wanted to.

When Tsunade FINALLY agreed to give him light missions, on the condition that he pass a short physical test, Naruto's heart soared. He didn't pay much attention to the details of the test, only hearing the words 'spar' and 'cleared for duty' before dashing out the door. As he reached the edge of the training grounds, his body did something that he never thought was humanly possible. His heart soared even higher, while also dropping like a stone through the center of the earth. Kakashi was leaning lazily against a tree, reading one of his Icha Icha books.

Briefly he considered running, but there was the whole internal conflict continuing to rip him apart and he didn't know whether he should be running toward or away from Kakashi. So, he just stood there like a dumbass for several seconds. Taking a deep breath, he gave himself a mental slap and walked into the clearing. It all felt so *wrong*! So awkward and guilty and horrible, and he knew he was the only one feeling it, and damn it! He did not like feeling uncomfortable around Kakashi, it was just...WRONG!

"I guess this means-"

"Sennin Mode," Kakashi interrupted coolly, not looking up from his book.

"Huh?" Naruto blinked, stopping a few meters away.

"I agreed to Sennin Mode for our sparring match."

"Oh, right," Naruto laughed nervously as he recalled their conversation in the ryokan, scratching the back of his head and sitting down in his meditation pose.

It wasn't easy getting his mind clear with the memory of being draped over the man's lap while he sicked his guts out, a hand rubbing his back to ease the pain, holding him up so he didn't slide onto the floor, gently wiping his face when he couldn't feel his own arms, shifting him back so his head was comfortably on- FUCKING HELL HE WAS SO GLAD HE WAS SITTING DOWN RIGHT NOW!

...breathe, you idiot, and get into Sennin Mode before Kakashi dies of boredom...

"That took longer than expected..." Kakashi drawled and snapped his book closed pointedly.

"Yeah, well, I've been a little distracted lately," Naruto grumbled quietly, opening his eyes to look at the Jounin.

Kakashi was gone, the place he was supposed to be was empty of body and chakra presence, and Naruto's eyes widened in shock as he scrambled forward to roll out of the way of the first attack. The skin on his right side tingled with the lick of electricity cutting through the ground where he'd been a split-second earlier. He landed on the balls of his feet, his fingers trailing across the grass as he skidded backward and kept his balance. Shit, he needed to focus!

He only caught a glimpse of a pair of grimly resolved mismatched eyes before Kakashi again seemed to vanish into thin air, and he was forced to jump out of the way as the dirt beneath his feet turned to quicksand. A few shadow clones provided enough of a distraction for him to get his bearings, but even in Sennin Mode he could feel his movements were slightly clunky and his reactions dull. He could sense where Kakashi was at any given point, but he wasn't fast enough to evade him completely. The Jounin was in top form, not to mention he had several years more experience under his belt. Naruto was still underweight and woefully out of practice.

Dodging a few more narrow misses, he growled in frustration as he plucked a shuriken out of his forearm. The cut was healed before the weapon left his fingers to deflect another aimed at his shoulder. He could feel his senses and his body starting to get closer to each other; he was getting a little faster, a little sharper, a little better at anticipating Kakashi's next move. But still not good enough, because the man was already behind him.

There wasn't time or room for a substitution, and he clenched his fists in aggravation as the edge of the Jounin's kunai rested firmly against his throat. A gloved hand appeared in front of his face, a small stone with faint wobbly writing on it held between the first and second fingers. Naruto blinked, genuinely startled that Kakashi had kept the message he'd left in the first cave.

"Page 17, and the kanji for 'love'," Kakashi said. "'A red sun / falls into the sea / what summer heat!' It was meant for Gaara, was it about Kōkai?"

"One of them had a brother there, and he was sending them supplies," Naruto replied, his cheeks warming up a bit and his heart thumping at the voice right next to his ear. He could feel the taller body behind him, though the only physical contact was the kunai holding him in place.

"They found him. He and his gang of smugglers were in charge of packing up any girls that needed to be shipped out through the port. Gaara spread him across the desert when they were finished interrogating him," Kakashi said darkly. "Apparently, that thing chained in the cave with you belonged to him."

Naruto's stomach churned at the information, and he flinched back slightly at the all too clear image of Ogre. There was only the briefest moment of contact with the body behind him, the feel of cloth giving and the ghosting sensation of muscle beneath it. Then it was gone, and he had to sprint across the clearing to avoid the lightning hound chasing him down. A pair of water dragons came at him from either side, pinning him in and giving him only one option to escape.

He knew it was a trap, but he didn't have much of a choice at that point. If he timed it just right, he might be able to get out of the pincer and come up with some sort of strategy. It only took three clones to boost him up into the air and over the crashing electrified water, but he made four. Kakashi liked to lead off his right side out of habit, but with him using his sharingan the lead could easily switch to the left. All he needed to see was a twitch of muscle, and he'd know which direction the Jounin was headed as his extra clone helped form an ōdama rasengan in one hand.

His clone was already grabbing his arm and starting to throw him when he spotted Kakashi below, the release point would depend on the Jounin. He picked up the cant to Kakashi's shoulders as the man started to shift his weight while forming seals, and a grin cracked across his features. He was going left. The clone let go of him, and his rasengan shattered the leading edge of the flock of stone daggers flying at him before slamming into the ground a foot from Kakashi. Damn it, too slow! That should have been closer, and now he was wide open!

The point of Kakashi's kunai was under his chin in the blink of an eye, and Naruto knelt there glaring venomously at the trees. Kakashi had 'killed' him twice, and Naruto was already starting to breathe harder. Sennin Mode wouldn't last much longer in the shape he was in, and the fallout was probably going to be brutal. Kakashi's hand was again in front of his eyes, the second stone held between his fingers, and Naruto had to bite back the desire to ask the Jounin why the heck he'd kept those pebbles.

"Page 24, and the Uzumaki swirl," Kakashi said from a little farther away than last time. Considering his position on the ground, Naruto knew it was perfectly sensible for Kakashi to not be as close...but he couldn't help...kind of...wishing... "'O snail / climb Mount Fuji, / but slowly, slowly!'" The words were bit out, thick with sarcasm.

"They mentioned another site and melting snow," Naruto replied. "I guessed it was higher in the mountains, and I..." He clenched his teeth and swallowed. "I wanted you to be extra cautious. One was a sensory type, and he had dogs. The other had that sealing technique, and I didn't know what else they were capable of."

The kunai under his chin trembled slightly as Kakashi's grip tightened around the handle, and Naruto closed his eyes. He was seriously going to get his ass handed to him today. Sakura had been wrong, 'upset' wasn't the right word. The Jounin was livid! Kakashi wasn't the type to hold a grudge like this, why was he so angry?!

"The sensory type didn't survive the trip back to Konoha," Kakashi grated. "Ibiki handed the other one over to an ANBU cleaning crew when he was done with him. His sealing jutsu was a kekkei genkai, and the technique used on you was supposed to be permanent. Something that couldn't be undone. Not even by him," he hissed.

Naruto's eyes snapped open wide, and relief flooded him. "Thank god I didn't let him touch you," he whispered without thinking.

The kunai was removed and something solid connected with his ribs, sending him flying across the clearing. It didn't actually hurt, but he still had to blink for a few seconds to collect his senses as he lurched to his feet. Kakashi was on him in a heartbeat, and he only just

blocked the right hook aimed at his face. He felt like he was floundering, blocking and dodging most of the taijutsu like a clumsy amateur.

In a corner of Naruto's mind he knew Kakashi was holding back, reading him like an open book and pushing him just enough to keep him off balance while landing the odd solid hit to make his point clear. He hated it. Half of him thought of simply dropping his guard and letting the Jounin stomp the piss out of him like he obviously wanted to, but the other stubborn half stopped him. He had to keep fighting even if it was futile, because it certainly wasn't pointless.

It was like every blow was punctuated with tightly contained needles of writhing emotion. It wasn't the same as when he had it out with Kiba or Lee or anyone else. The feedback he got from others was always in big shouting bursts and loud explosions, every bit of their anger shoved to the forefront. But it felt like Kakashi's emotions were breaking through by accident, as if they were only a stinging echo of the real thing.

The desire to drop his guard vanished, turning into a dedicated need to get Kakashi to let loose. It felt like he was suffocating under the weight of Kakashi's stifling control over his emotions. His focus sharpened more, and he put everything he had into silently screaming his defiance back at the Jounin, desperate to get those walls to crack just a little. Something was keeping him from hearing what Kakashi truly wanted to say, and he was going to fight tooth and nail to break through that barrier.

His body wasn't quite keeping up with his sharpening mind, but at last he spotted an opening. Oh, sure, it was probably deliberate on the Jounin's part, but he had to jump on the chance before it was too late. Pivoting on the ball of his foot, he ducked under a swift jab and grabbed Kakashi's arm to lock it over his shoulder. He was half an inch from getting his center of balance set so he could throw Kakashi over his shoulder when Sennin Mode dropped. ...and he dropped right along with it. Damn it, Kakashi had timed that opening perfectly!

"Shit..." Naruto groaned, gasping for air as every muscle in his body turned to pudding. The world sort of spun around and jerked to a halt, leaving him dangling as limp as a old rag with his hands brushing the grass and his feet on the ground. Kakashi had a tight grip on the front of his jacket, keeping him from falling any farther. "You win...do what you want with me," he wheezed dramatically, not even bothering to lift his head as he stared blearily at the upside-down trees.

The grip on his shirt flinched, then gave him a good shake. "Kyuubi Chakra Mode".

Naruto attempted to oblige, but there was a ferocious yank on the other end of the chakra source and he blinked up at Kurama.

Squirm, you little fucker, Kurama grinned with wicked delight, hunching his shoulders and digging his claws into the floor as he threw every ounce of his will into resisting the pull on his chakra.

"God damn it!" Naruto wailed, pulling on his hair and roiling at his situation. He was going to kill that blasted fox!

"Oi," Kakashi said, giving Naruto another small shake.

"I can't use Kurama's chakra, he's mad at me! You're mad at me! Fuck, *everyone's mad at me!"*

"And who's fault is that?" Kakashi asked dryly.

"Mine!" Naruto shouted possessively as he flailed his arms. "And I don't regret it! And I'm sorry!"

Kakashi let go of Naruto's jacket, and the blonde flopped to the ground with a soft grunt. He looked up at the Jounin, still oozing obstinance. Kakashi narrowed his eye, then turned and sat down. Naruto stared at the distance between them; an arm's length away, just out of reach. For whatever reason at that precise moment he really didn't like it, so he rolled to his side and shakily pushed himself to a sitting position that closed the distance by half.

"Why is Kurama angry with you?" Kakashi asked neutrally, not moving or looking at the young man next to him.

Naruto shifted uncomfortably, but didn't look away from the Jounin's stoic profile. "I locked him up when the mercenaries handed me over."

"You did ***what?!"*** Kakashi snarled, grabbing the front of Naruto's jacket with one hand and hauling him to within a few inches of his enraged face.

"The sensory type's clone hit me with a sedative as soon as he got hold of me, and he started draining my chakra!" Naruto said defiantly, clenching his teeth and swallowing the urge to cringe. He couldn't look away, he couldn't back down, he had to keep pushing now that there was a small crack in the wall. "I was blacking out, I had to do something to keep them from finding Kurama and figuring out who I was!"

"What kind of reason is that to throw your life away, you idiot!" Kakashi snapped, slamming Naruto's back into the dirt and kneeling over him.

"I didn't throw my life away!" Naruto shot back, trying not to pay attention to the pain in his chest that had nothing to do with the Jounin's knuckles digging into his collarbone.

"Yes, you did!" Kakashi shouted, clutching Naruto's jacket with both hands and thumping him hard into the ground to punctuate the sentence. "Not only once, but *twice!* Why do you think Tsunade-sama let you go on that mission?! Why the hell do you think *I* let you walk away from me that morning when I *knew* you were inexperienced, untrained, and unprepared?! *It's because I knew the kyuubi would be there to protect you!* That is the *only* reason I let you go, but you threw that away and set yourself up as a *god damn sacrifice!*

"Do you have any concept of how valuable you are?! How important *you* are?! You keep touting your philosophy of how every Konoha shinobi is important and shouldn't be sacrificed, yet you somehow can't get it into your thick head that *that includes* ***you!*** You don't figure your own worth into anything when you jump in to save someone at the cost of yourself! You'll crawl up anyone's ass if they do that without batting an eye! ***So, tell me why***

I'm the one left watching you bleed out on the ground while you smile like it's fucking okay that you're dying in my arms!"

Naruto couldn't maintain his defiant bearing while Kakashi verbally tore strips out of him, and by the end of it he sincerely just wanted to beat the shit out of himself. He didn't even want to try to muster the energy to fight anymore, he was completely and utterly defeated. He'd wanted to break through to the Jounin so he could hear him clearly, thinking it would be better if Kakashi stopped holding back and let it all out of his system. Except, now *he* felt like the one who'd been shattered into a billion pieces because he hadn't realized what he'd put the man through.

He'd never seen Kakashi that angry or that hurt. He'd never seen him that close to the breaking point. It choked the air out of him and left him feeling like there was still a hole in his chest, only this time the weapon was twisting and fracturing into his flesh, crushing his ribs and ripping his heart to shreds. The pain and fury in that one dark eye was all his fault. His foolishness had done this from the beginning, and he'd deliberately kicked that wound right back open.

"I'm sorry," Naruto whispered.

"That's not good enough this time," Kakashi said, sitting back on his heels and loosening his grip on the blonde's jacket.

An irrational terrifying fear surged through Naruto as Kakashi looked away and pulled his hands back, and he lunged up to wrap his arms tightly around the Jounin's neck. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" He insisted, resting his chin on the shoulder that had gone as rigid as stone. "You were right, and I was wrong, and I'm so sorry!"

"Naruto, let go of me," Kakashi said quietly.

"No!" Naruto shook his head fiercely, latching onto the back of Kakashi's vest as if he was going to drown if he let go. "I'm an idiot, and I'm reckless, and I can't stop fucking up! But I'm trying! *I'm trying!* All I can do is try not to make the same mistakes again, and apologize for how worthless that sounds! I shouldn't have locked Kurama up, and I'm so sorry you had to be the one to pick up the pieces of my stupid decision! You didn't deserve that, Kakashi, and I'm sorry that you..." He choked on the words, unable to say them aloud.

...I'm sorry that you were the only one I could have wished to be there for me...

"Please, you have to believe me," Naruto pleaded. "I didn't throw my life away, I never ever planned on dying! I knew you were coming, I had to be there alive when you found me! I'm just too stupid for my own good most of the time! I never thought they'd seal me completely away from my chakra or Kurama, I didn't even know they could do that! I just couldn't...I couldn't...*I couldn't let that man touch you after what he'd done to me! I had to watch your back, I had to do something!"*

He could feel the tension reluctantly easing from Kakashi's frame, inch by stubborn inch, but he didn't relax his hold for a single second as the silence dragged on. Kakashi shifted one arm slowly, and Naruto quickly weighed the options of continuing to cling like a leech or letting

go if the Jounin started to try to pry him loose from his death grip. His eyes widened slightly, then closed as he almost sobbed in relief at the familiar touch that always seemed to ruffle his hair without realizing he was doing it.

"I hate you," Kakashi sighed.

"I know," Naruto said, opening his eyes and looking at the trees with a wry smile.

"You were supposed to say what a bad liar I am."

"I know."

"The human head weighs eight pounds."

"I...didn't know that..."

"I know."

Naruto snerked and sat back on his heels, letting his arms drop to his sides and wishing Kakashi didn't do the same. It didn't quite feel like things between them were back to the way they were before he'd ended up in the hospital, but it was a heck of a lot closer than what it had been when he'd first stepped onto the training grounds. Thankfully, the weirdness was gone on his part, and he no longer felt the strange cavernous distance that had been attempting to separate them.

"Well? Did I fail with flying colors?" Naruto asked, all too eager to lighten the mood and start working his way back into the comfortable conversations he was used to having with the Jounin.

"Yes," Kakashi said. "For anything above a D-rank mission."

"So cruel!" Naruto slumped to the ground. "Being a Genin sucks..."

"Yes, yes it does," Kakashi said, standing up and grabbing the back of Naruto's collar to pull him to his feet as well. "Come on, Genin, you have trash to pick out of the river."

"That shouldn't take too long," Naruto shrugged and brushed the dirt off his clothes before forming the seal to make clones.

"Ah, no clones," Kakashi said firmly. "You've lost too much muscle strength, you need the physical training."

"And plucking empty cans out of the river will do that how...?"

"This is how," Kakashi smiled sweetly, forming a few quick seals and putting his hand on the blonde's shoulder. "Summoning Jutsu."

It felt like a boulder had been summoned onto his shoulders, and Naruto collapsed under the unexpected weight. His face hit the dirt and he struggled for a moment, kicking and shoving his way out from under the thing pinning him down. Finally getting free and landing harshly

on his rump, he whirled on the Jounin to rail at him. The words got caught in his throat, however, as he looked at the big brown 'boulder'.

"Yo, Naruto," Pakkun said drolly from where he sat atop Bull's head.

"Pakkun! Bull! You're alive!" Naruto's indignation was instantly forgotten as he tackled the pair of dogs in his joyful relief at seeing them both. Bull weathered the treatment placidly, but Pakkun gave the blonde a painful nip on the nose for treating him like a plushie instead of a trained ninken. "What about the others? Where are they?" He asked excitedly, looking up at Kakashi and rubbing his sore nose while Pakkun sat resentfully on his head.

The taller man had an expression that Naruto couldn't interpret, and his happiness began to fade as concerned confusion threaded into his stomach. There was something almost painful in Kakashi's eye, almost puzzled, almost worried, almost a lot of things that didn't make any sense put together. The Jounin looked away quickly, paused for a second, and then dropped to a knee, slapping his palm on the ground. Six more dogs appeared in a puff of smoke.

"Ah, you're all here!" Naruto laughed delightedly, scrambling forward on his knees to do a quick head-count and limb tally. The ninken were more bemused than anything, scooting warily away or simply staring at him as if he'd grown a second head while he confirmed that they were all intact.

"Of course we're here, why wouldn't we be? You're a silly one," Bisuke said, arching his eyebrow.

"Yeah, I guess I am," Naruto replied, scratching his arm and trying not to let his memories dampen his mood. "It was pretty silly of me to believe that stuff I overheard. Heh, I didn't even hear all of it, just bits and pieces, and I suppose I jumped to conclusions." He shrugged and grinned, shaking the recollection off. "But hey, you're all here, so I'm fine with being silly."

"Good...because silly is exactly what you are..." Bisuke mumbled, looking away guiltily along with the rest of the pack. Naruto blinked in surprise, but didn't get the chance to ask any questions.

"All right, you lot can pull some community service since you're not busy," Kakashi said, standing up. "Stay upriver and help clean up. Shiba, stay downstream and catch anything that gets by our sanitation worker." The six dogs zipped off, and Kakashi lifted a brow at Naruto in expectation.

"I got it, I got it," Naruto sighed, then looked over his shoulder at Bull with a wincing grimace.

Hell, but that big dog was heavy, and he tossed a suspicious glance at Kakashi as he slung Bull over his shoulders. There was probably some kind of weight jutsu on him, but there was no time to complain because the Jounin was pulling out his Icha Icha book and herding him toward the river. As soon as he stepped into the water a steady flow of scattered trash began to float downstream. Picking up the long pointed stick on the bank and holding onto Bull's

legs with his free hand to keep the dog steady, he stumbled in the thigh-deep water to spear and fling the rubbish into the basket sitting on the riverbank.

Some twinges of embarrassment had stopped him from shedding any of his clothes for the task when they'd first gotten there, ridiculous as the notion was in the mid-day summer heat. However, after 30 minutes of discomfort from wet clinging clothing that had him sweating buckets and dragged him closer to weariness, he gave his modesty the finger and shucked everything but his mesh t-shirt and his boxers. Cripes, he didn't know what he was getting all flustered about anyway! It wasn't like he was hiding anything Kakashi hadn't already seen.

Pakkun was quick to whack him if he let any of the debris get past him, Kurama was sitting on his chakra as pleased as punch while Bull slowly squashed the strength out of him, and Kakashi was laconically stretched out on a tree branch with his nose very firmly tucked into his porn novel. To hell with them all! He was going to get through this and show them he was made of sturdier stuff! He was so focused on his task that, when the litter no longer came drifting toward him, it took him a few minutes to actually realize he might be done.

"That's it?" Naruto panted, his voice breaking slightly.

"Looks like it," Pakkun said thoughtfully.

"Oh, thank god," Naruto groaned, wobbling to the bank and wishing he could flop on the grass and pass out. The late afternoon sun was still bright enough to make the dappled shade on the riverbank look like a little slice of heaven.

"We'll head back, Kakashi," Pakkun said.

"Yeah, thanks for the help," Kakashi replied with a nod, dropping out of his perch.

"I don't remember the last time—holy shit, hold me down!"

Naruto gasped as the weight on his shoulders vanished and he tripped forward, feeling like he would literally start to float away into the sky. It was the eeriest sensation, not knowing if he was going to be able to stay connected with the ground, and he clutched Kakashi's offered arm tight. He was a little too busy reminding himself that gravity did still exist to notice the precise moment when Kakashi's posture went rigid.

However, when his brain registered the fact that the arm he was almost wrapping himself around was as stiff and unresponsive as a tree branch due to Kakashi's obvious discomfort at having him practically climbing all over him, he let go and jumped back. Much to his dismay, that simple move didn't work out as well as he'd hoped. His embarrassed apologetic laugh came out as a warped startled gurgle as his tired clumsy feet got tangled up and he fell back.

For an instant Kakashi's hand was on the small of his back, but the man pulled away so fast and clamped onto Naruto's elbow instead, that he had to wonder if he'd just been imagining things. He grabbed a handful of vest at the Jounin's shoulder, steadying himself and catching his balance as his face burned. Thank goodness he was on Kakashi's blind side, and the man had his face turned slightly away so all he could see was dark cloth. Mumbling out an apology, he quickly turned and stuffed his noodley limbs into his clothes.

He never had caught when Kakashi periodically emptied his basket out into plastic bags, but as he looked at the riverbank the Jounin had apparently done it six times. That was a lot of trash... He sighed and started gathering them up. Kakashi plucked half of them out of his hands, and they walked to the dumpster in relative silence.

"Well, that was torturous," Naruto grunted, tossing the bags into the large rubbish bin. "What am I doing tomorrow? Scraping lichen off the Hokage Monument with boulders tied to my arms?"

"Ooh, I hadn't thought of that one," Kakashi hummed, brushing his hands off and sliding them into his pockets as they both headed toward the village proper.

"You aren't human..." Naruto grumbled, glaring at the taller man as he rubbed his sore shoulders and trundled wearily next to him.

"Took you long enough to notice," Kakashi chuckled.

"What a pair of monsters we are," Naruto laughed, pressing his knuckles into his lower back to try to ease the aching tension. "I bet you brought this whole idea to Baa-chan the day you were released from the hospital."

"Nope, I didn't."

"Really?"

"It was the day after," Kakashi said with a sly look.

"Ass," Naruto snickered and shoved his shoulder into the Jounin's bicep with playful malice.

"All this sweet-talking will not save you from the myriad of unfathomable hells that D-rank missions are capable of inducing. I hope you know that."

"D-rank missions are hell to begin with. They're only made unfathomable because you're a sadistic bastard."

"I like to think of it as being creative."

"Well, how about you creatively find a way that doesn't involve crushing my spine next time," Naruto said sardonically.

"Oh, sure, take all the fun out of it," Kakashi shot back, then stopped and jerked his chin at the small building they were passing by. "Go on, sit down."

"Eh?" Naruto turned his head to look, then dove through the wide entrance of Ichiraku and scrambled onto a stool.

"Oh, Naruto, you look like you've been working hard," Teuchi smiled from behind the counter as Ayame did the same and started gathering the ingredients for what she knew was going to be ordered.

"Yep, I'm finally back on the roster! A large miso ramen, please," Naruto beamed, then looked over his shoulder at where Kakashi was turning to walk away outside the restaurant. "Hey, Kakashi-sensei, aren't you going to sit? Come on, I'll treat. I never did beat you at that card game."

"How suspiciously generous of you," Kakashi drawled after a slight pause, ducking under the dark blue banners hanging above the open doors. "But I've already eaten, thanks anyway."

"You were in a tree all afternoon," Naruto snorted. "What did you eat? Leaves?"

"Bark," Kakashi shrugged, sitting down and putting his elbows on the counter.

"...bark," Naruto intoned flatly.

"Mmm, it keeps my huge buckteeth from growing too long," Kakashi nodded, curling the first two fingers of one hand and propping them in front of his mouth to demonstrate the length of his hidden teeth.

With the color of his fingerless gloves blending into his mask, his pale fingers really did look ridiculously like enormous teeth. Naruto blinked and literally fell over laughing, too beat and shocked at the unexpected hammy joke to even care about propriety. Why was it that the dumbest things were always so outrageously hilarious when you were bone-tired? He simply lay there, one leg kipped up on the stool as he clutched his aching sides and gasped for air till the mirth abated. It had been a long time since he'd laughed that hard, and it felt good.

"Your food's going to get cold," Kakashi said with dry amusement, looking lazily down at the blonde with his chin on his palm.

"I'd eat Ichiraku frozen and still be blissfully happy," Naruto grinned, wiping the tears from his eyes and crawling back onto his stool.

"That sounds..."

"Exquisite?" Naruto prompted, breaking a set of chopsticks apart.

"Not the word I would have picked, but to each their own."

"You just need to expand your culinary horizons," Naruto said archly. "Itadakimasu," he sang, scooping up a small curtain of noodles and blowing on them.

"This coming from the guy who avoids vegetables like the plague," Kakashi drawled, shaking his head.

"I'll have you know that I've been eating almost nothing but rabbit food for nearly a week," he scowled around a mouthful of ramen.

Kakashi lifted his eyebrow, stood up, walked to the door to look outside, then sat back down with a somewhat amazed expression.

"What was that?" Naruto asked.

"I was just making sure the sky was still up there."

"Oh, ha ha," Naruto said caustically, taking a drink of the soup broth. "You know what? I'll prove it to you, I'll bring you a bento tomorrow."

"I...kind of like my intestines the way they are..."

"Shut up! I'm making you lunch for tomorrow, and you're going to love it. I'm getting pretty good at cooking up carrots."

"Well, far be it from me to pass up such a...rare...opportunity," Kakashi said dubiously as he stood up. "I'll see you at the bridge in the morning, don't be late."

"Tch! Try not to keep me waiting forever," Naruto snorted, watching the Jounin leave.

He took a long soak in his tub that night to soothe the dull aching in his muscles, grumbling at Kurama for continuing to hoard his chakra. The fox just grinned impishly, radiating an immense amount of arrogant satisfaction. Before crawling into bed he sprinkled a few flakes of food into the small fishtank Iruka had taken care of for him while he'd been gone, watching the little orange goldfish weave through the few threads of seaweed as it ate. Then he traced the painted lines on the ceramic mask propped against the tank on the bedside table.

Ayame had given him kind of an odd forced smile when he'd left, and he was still baffled as to why Kakashi had left money on the counter to pay for his meal without even saying anything. He shook his head and sank into his pillow, figuring Ayame had been tired and Kakashi had probably wanted to compensate for lunch the next day. Sleep came swiftly, and he awoke with a wet sticky mess in his boxers. He didn't remember dreaming at all, but apparently he'd had an unnecessarily pleasant one some time in the middle of the night.

Waiting for Kakashi by himself the following morning would have been mind-numbingly boring if not for the deck of cards he still packed into his supply pouch. Well, technically it still was horribly boring since he got tired of practicing after an hour. He was about to go into Sennin Mode just to see where the Jounin was when the man himself appeared and handed him a communicator earpiece. The rest of the morning and early afternoon was spent in a hellish exhausting farce of patience and running.

The seven voices – eight if he counted the occasional ear-shattering bark from Bull – putting up an endless overlapping stream of chatter and conflicting directions made him want to tear his hair out alone. But the fact that he had to sprint around Konoha trying to chase down and find the cat that the ninken were so obviously not even really attempting to track made him want to scream as well. He would have, too, except he was a little out of breath from pelting from one side of the village to the other as the scattered dogs insisted they each spotted the lost pet. And, of course, he had to get there as fast as humanly possible *without* any help from Kurama's cruel ass.

By the time Kakashi put an end to the 'mission', Naruto was starving, frustrated, grimy with sweat and dust, and ready to drop. He dragged himself to the quiet wooded area where Kakashi was waiting, and very nearly threw his communicator at the lounging Jounin when he spotted the squat animal carrier and its sleeping occupant. Words failed him in his outrage,

and all he could do was fume and stomp to the narrow stream nearby to dunk his head in it and attempt to cool off while cleaning himself up a bit.

"It sucks when things don't get communicated properly, doesn't it," Kakashi said with a touch of smugness. Naruto whipped off his jacket, plunged it in the water, and then threw it at the Jounin. "Oi, you'll get the bento wet," Kakashi grinned, ducking and catching the wet garment away from him.

"I should let you go hungry!" Naruto snapped, stalking over to the man and snatching his jacket back to fling it over a low branch.

"I love it when a plan comes together," Kakashi sighed happily.

"Don't you dare insult my food before you've tasted it!"

"So, you're saying I can insult it after I've tried it?"

"Shut up! I worked hard on it this morning!"

"A fact which has no bearing on whether or not the end product is edible," Kakashi said, warily watching Naruto unwrap the two bento boxes.

Naruto responded by angrily shoving one of the boxes in the Jounin's face and holding it right under his nose. Kakashi looked down at it, his eye twitching slightly as he swallowed and wrinkled his nose, then back up at the irate blonde.

"Okay, okay," Kakashi lifted his hands and took the box, scooting around so he was sitting with his back to Naruto.

Flopping down behind the taller man, Naruto stretched out his sore legs and slouched comfortably against Kakashi's back. He did it mainly to assure the Jounin that he was, in fact, turned away and would be unable to see the man's face as he ate. And if the asshole was going to put him through hell, then Naruto was damn well going to use him as a leaning post. He could feel his cheeks warm up as Kakashi's stiff frame heaved a deep sigh of resignation before relaxing back against him, and he smiled at the familiar strong supporting curve of the Jounin's back.

He couldn't count how many times they'd sat like that over the course of six years, and he couldn't remember the last time they'd done it. Permission was never asked. Protest was never given. It had always been that way; an unconscious act that was as commonplace as a conversation. He bit his lip and lifted the lid over his lunch, trying not to think too much about the way just sitting there now felt like a guilty indulgence.

"Ah, Naruto?" Kakashi asked with a touch of trepidation. "I thought you said you were going to cook carrots."

"I did," Naruto replied, picking up his chopsticks and taking a quick drink of water to swallow the heat pricking at him. Kakashi's voice vibrated through his back, and that subtle

muffled quality was gone now that the thin dark cloth wasn't covering his mouth. "I made carrots, rice, and zucchini tempura. Itadakim-"

"Stop!" Kakashi interrupted. "Please tell me the...uh...carrots did not start out this color."

"Of course they didn't," Naruto scowled, popping a carrot wedge into his mouth. "I cooked them in soy sauce."

"Naruto, these are not carrots! This is soy sauce with a carrot-like structure to it!"

Naruto jerked his head back, smiling in satisfaction at Kakashi's grunt of pain as the base of his skull was whacked. "Stop complaining! Start with the zucchini, then."

"...where is it?"

"It's the tempura, weren't you listening?"

"I was listening, that's why I'm asking you where the zucchini *is* in this...*loaf* of tempura batter!"

"It's in the middle."

"In...the middle..." Kakashi said flatly.

"The batter is the best part of tempura. I made it a little thicker so I could use extra," Naruto shrugged, munching his way pleasantly through the meal.

"You...didn't do anything strange to the rice...did you?" Kakashi asked somewhat fearfully.

"Will you shut up and eat!" Naruto shouted, snapping his head back again. "Holy shit, how rude can you get?!"

"Sorry, my survival instincts just kind of took over," Kakashi said dryly, rubbing the back of his head tenderly.

"Well, prepare to have them redirected if you don't stop bitching!"

"I'm not sure which is more mind-boggling," Kakashi chuckled. "The fact that *you* are telling *me* to eat vegetables, or the fact that I'm not entirely sure this food-like substance can actually be defined as 'vegetables' anymore-Ow! God, your head is hard! Spare an old man from too much brain damage while you're back there."

"Stop calling yourself old and eat!"

"Yes, Mommy..."

Silence reigned over the pair for several minutes, and Naruto set his empty lunch box aside. Kakashi's occasional shivering and desperate gulping of water had slacked off, and Naruto was starting to feel the guilty disappointment creeping into his gut. He thought the food was just fine! Sure, it wasn't perfect, but he'd tried...and apparently failed miserably yet again. It

was frustrating not being able to find one small thing he was innately good at right from the start, but it was even more so when any new thing he tried always blew up spectacularly in his face right away!

"You didn't have to eat it..." Naruto mumbled as Kakashi set the empty box aside.

"The lump on the back of my head suggests otherwise," he replied wryly.

"You didn't have to eat it," Naruto repeated sulkily, reaching into his supply pouch and holding out a small jar of ointment as an apology.

"It wasn't the worst meal I've had," Kakashi shrugged nonchalantly after a pause, taking the ointment.

Naruto had to quickly turn his head and look down, fighting his reflex to glance over at the voice that was suddenly closer to his ear; still clear and unmasked as Kakashi looked over his shoulder at him.

"You were in ANBU, of course it wasn't," Naruto sighed.

"At least the rice was perfect?"

"That's because it's *rice,*" Naruto said pointedly, tapping his finger on his leg. Crap, it was so hard not to turn and *look!* Why was Kakashi still talking over his shoulder?! It was like dangling ice cream in front of a kid on a hot day, but keeping it just out of reach.

"Don't insult the only palatable thing about the meal," Kakashi laughed. "Tell you what, I'll bring the veg tomorrow if you bring the rice. At least I finally found out why you haven't been putting on weight as fast as you should be. I hate to say it, but cup ramen is probably healthier than this."

"So, I get my stash back?" Naruto asked eagerly over his shoulder as soon as Kakashi's voice turned around to face front.

"Negative," Kakashi drawled, his words again subtly muffled behind his mask. "You get a cookbook and a restraining order on your use of soy sauce and tempura batter."

"Stingy bastard..."

"It's downright disturbing how well you know me," Kakashi said, the grin evident in his tone before he pushed his shoulders back a bit. "Come on, we have to return the Daimyo's wife's cat before she starts howling for an ANBU search party."

"As many times as the poor thing flees from her clutches, you'd think she'd get the hint," Naruto sighed, heaving himself to his feet with a groan at how tight his muscles had gotten.

"Kurama's still giving you the third-degree, huh?" Kakashi mused, scowling thoughtfully as he picked up the cat-carrier and gave Naruto a scrutinizing look.

"What can I say? The asshole knows how to hold a grudge," Naruto groused, lifting his arms to stretch out his back.

You're damn right I do, Kurama smirked with a devilish gleam in his eyes, darting out his tails and swiftly wrapping Naruto up.

"What the-!" Naruto abruptly felt his knees buckle as the fox blocked the muscle control in his legs. *Kurama, what the hell are you-*

His angry protest was cut off by a more pressing situation. 'Pressing' being the operative word because there was a strong arm around his waist, with the hand at the small of his back catching him against the front of a green vest before he fell. It was a reflex that had him draping his arms around Kakashi's neck. His arms were already above his head to begin with, it was *A REFLEX!* Oh god, this was so not happening! So incredibly NOT HAPPENING! Because his face was on god damn fire and he could feel the length of the Jounin's body just holding onto him and keeping him safe and he wanted to lean into it and stay there AND COULD THE EARTH PLEASE JUST OPEN UP AND SWALLOW HIM RIGHT NOW?!

KURAMA, I AM GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU! Naruto bellowed, kicking his way out of the tangled mass of red fur while Kakashi eased him down to the ground so he could sit. The damn fox just roared with laughter and pounded his fist on the floor, pulling his tails back and swishing them behind himself.

"Ah, well, maybe we'll take it a little easier tomorrow," Kakashi said, clearing his throat and rubbing the back of his neck as he crouched next to the blonde with his face and body turned slightly away.

Again, all Naruto saw was that cloth-covered blind side of Kakashi's profile, and he gave a silent thankful prayer to the gods. Kakashi had caught him on his left side, so there was a good chance he hadn't seen the absolutely ridiculous shade of red Naruto had turned. The worst part was the heat in his face wasn't going away nearly fast enough, and it was trickling down his spine making him feel almost giddy as well as unbearably humiliated.

"It's not a big deal," Naruto shrugged, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible while his voice cracked and flushed all of his pride down the toilet. There was no way he was going to tell Kakashi that Kurama had done that on purpose! "I'll be fine by morning, and you said it yourself; I need the training. Besides, it's not like this is the first time I've been-"

"Sit," Kakashi commanded, placing his hand on the top of Naruto's head and pushing him back down as the blonde started to get up. "Stay," he continued, still looking away as he pulled his hand back.

"Arf?" Naruto barked dryly, giving the Jounin a flat look as he sat there.

"Good boy. I'll go return the cat," he said, picking up the carrier by his side and standing. "You just...stay there until you've got your legs back. We'll call it a day for now," he said, finally glancing over his shoulder to give Naruto a brief unreadable look. "Rest up and be ready in the morning."

Naruto drew his knees up and heaved a grumbling sigh as the Jounin left him there, still flushed with embarrassment and more than a bit of indignation at being treated like a puppy. He took another long soak in the tub that night, letting the hot water draw out the tension in his muscles. Lying in bed, he held the mask above him and gently tapped the side of it with one finger while his thoughts rolled through his mind.

He fell asleep wondering what the mission would be, and if they were actually going to be 'taking it easy'. He woke up wondering if he was even going to be able to *survive* the day. Clutching his pillow as he panted in the aftermath of a dream, he shoved it over his sweat-drenched face and screamed out his frustration at what his wretched brain had decided to do to him that morning. After a few minutes of writhing and cussing, he quickly dumped his damp sticky boxers and sheets into his hamper and then scrubbed himself clean with a vengeance.

Grimacing as he looked at himself in the mirror, he was at least glad he was up so early. It gave him time to cool himself off as well as make his half of lunch without being rushed. He refused to acknowledge the notion that he put more care and attention into making the rice that morning. IT. WAS. *RICE*. It would be like saying he made extra special *toast.* Completely absurd! And yet he packed it up into his lunch box with a stupid smile on his face, because he knew it was the best fucking rice he'd ever made.

Naruto arrived at the bridge early and waited with nervous impatience, thoroughly scolding himself for acting like a schoolgirl with a crush until he calmed into a state of belligerent nervous impatience. He had just pulled out his deck of cards when the familiar figure of Yamato strolled up to him. Unable to hide his disappointment, he visibly sagged at the sight of the man and put his cards away.

"Yamato-taichou? Where's Kakashi-sensei?" Naruto asked, sliding down from where he'd been sitting on the rail of the bridge.

"Good morning to you too, Naruto," Yamato replied dryly, stopping in front of the blonde. "Kakashi-senpai was called out for a mission. He told me to take over for him."

"He didn't go alone, did he?"

"Not that it's any of your business," Yamato said sternly, crossing his arms. "But he went to support another squad, and that is all I'm telling you."

"All right, all right," Naruto said, lifting his hands before the older man brought out his Scary Face. "Well, what are we doing today, then? Pulling weeds? Counting spoons? Baby-sitting?"

"'Baby-sitting' is more appropriate than you think," Yamato grumbled, then poked Naruto in the shoulder and directed him toward the training grounds. "You'll be doing some light sparring. You get one clone, and no going into Sennin Mode or either of your Kyuubi Modes."

"Boooooring," Naruto sighed, picking up his bento and lacing his fingers behind his head as he walked. "I have to spar with myself?"

"No, you get to spar with me," Yamato said, rapping Naruto over the head with his knuckles. "I was told specifically to go easy on you today, so don't make me disobey orders."

Naruto grinned and rubbed the top of his head. The man he'd been hoping and somewhat dreading to see might not have shown up that morning, but as far as he was concerned Yamato was probably the next best thing. He did enjoy Yamato's company and he chatted amiably as they walked to the training grounds, all the while thinking how he could squeeze information about Kakashi's ANBU days out of the dark-haired man without making it sound too obvious.

It took Yamato all of 30 seconds to figure out Naruto's 'innocent' questions had a distinctly ulterior motive, and the blonde found himself chewing on a lot of dirt as they sparred. He wasn't exactly known for his lack of persistence, unfortunately, and by the end of the day Yamato's impatience had reached critical mass. Naruto limped home with a much healthier respect for the man's fighting skills, but none the wiser about Kakashi's past. His only consolation that night was that Kurama deigned it vaguely worth his effort to heal the myriad of lumps on his head while he soaked in the tub.

The next week went by in a similar manner. Every morning started with a bout of cussing and a nearly ritualistic shoving of dirty sheets and boxers into his hamper to be cleaned that evening. Yamato's creativity with making D-rank missions a living hell was almost on par with Kakashi's, and he patently refused to breathe a single word about his past with the silver-haired Jounin. The only positive change was the fact that Kurama eventually stopped his constant vigilance over his chakra, and relinquished himself to his normal sleeping schedule.

By the end of day eight, Naruto wasn't entirely sure if Yamato was at the breaking point where he'd start to talk or he'd start to break bones just to get the blonde to shut up. The man must have felt the same, because, after literally dragging Naruto out of the muddy field he was attempting to plant some kind of medicinal weed in, he flat-out told him to his face to ask Kakashi. It didn't help that the next thing out of Yamato's mouth was some advice on making sure he wrote a note explaining *in detail* why he'd decided to commit suicide at such a young age.

After trudging dejectedly home that evening, Naruto stood in front of his door and looked down at himself. He was beyond filthy, and he idly considered going around to the back of the building to hose himself down first. But he was also *tired*, and that idea was cast away since it would take too much effort to scale the stairs twice more. While he could draw on Kurama's chakra a little without waking the fox up, Naruto couldn't muster the motivation to do it. He sighed and tried not to track too much mud across his floor as he made his way to his washroom.

A bath was out of the question in his state, and he tossed his mud-caked clothes into the corner before stepping into the shower. For a long time he simply stood under the hot water, half leaning against the wall until he just sighed and gave in to his desire to sit the hell down. When it felt as though most of the dirt had been rinsed away, he rolled up onto his knees and fumbled for his soap and washcloth while the shower massaged his weary back.

He lathered his hair with the soap instead of his shampoo in exasperation, tilting his head back to let the water clear the suds from his face. He didn't know why Yamato was being so

stubborn, it wasn't like he was asking for details about secret missions. He just wanted to know a little about what Kakashi was like back then! And damn it, he was not buying the stale 'He's always been the same.' line! Leaning his forehead against the wall, he glared at the off-white tile.

What the hell was he doing?! Why couldn't he let this go?! He *knew* Yamato wouldn't talk, and yet he kept on pestering the man! It was almost like he was *trying* to get someone to tell him to mind his own fucking business and stop obsessing over Kakashi! He scowled thoughtfully, washing the back of his neck and shoulders with the soapy cloth. Was that what he was doing unconsciously? Yamato had certainly done pretty much just that today, but it hadn't helped. That damn dream would wake him again in the morning, and his brain would be stuck on one focus because he couldn't figure out what the hell was going on with himself!

Scrubbing harshly at his chest, he didn't try to ignore the ache this time. He had to understand, he had to know the truth of it. He could accept the fact that he missed Kakashi, but this feeling was going beyond anything he was familiar with. *What* did he miss?

...everything...

He rolled his eyes at himself and rinsed out the washcloth to foam it up again with soap before tackling his arms. Okay, fine, he missed everything! What did that include?! Start with the easy stuff: The lazy way he didn't give a shit about anything, but always ended up caring if something was wrong, and giving advice when it was needed. The way he was always there to help if there was real trouble. The way he was just always *there!* His cynical humor, his jibes, the way he chuckled without laughing directly at Naruto; like he was part of the joke, too.

Well, except that one time Kakashi had been rolling on the floor laughing *at* him at how the Jounin's clothes didn't fit his smaller frame. Naruto slowed his hands as he let the soapy washcloth drag across his side and circle his navel. Warmth seeped into his chest at the memory, pushing out and making his stomach dance. He'd been so pissed off at the time that he hadn't given it any thought, but he'd never seen Kakashi laugh like that. Laughing so carefree and unrestrained.

Something tightened behind his rib cage. It felt like hunger and greed wrapped in a knot of joy and want. Of all the thousands of other things he could list of what he missed about Kakashi, that was the one thing he *ached* for. The single thing he'd only ever seen once. If he could just have that. If he could just hear that laugh, have that voice smiling and happy he was there, have that inscrutable gaze wanting him to stay.

The warmth in him turned up a few degrees and he shivered, remembering the raw desire in Kakashi's expression on that rainy day. Was that what he wanted, too? Did he want more than just the comforting presence and laughter? His soapy hands slid down past his navel hesitantly, brushing the base of his hardening member. It was one thing to wake up from a dream, it was another to dream while you were awake.

Naruto had never fantasized about another man before...that didn't involve some kind of strange orgy because he'd picked up the wrong manga at the bookstore and ended up with that image in his head BUT THIS WAS NOT ABOUT THAT VERY WEIRD MOMENT IN

HIS LIFE! This was about whether or not he was actually seriously wanting to get into Kakashi's pants, or if he was just being mind-fucked by his own damn brain!

Taking a deep breath, he wrapped one hand around the hard flesh between his thighs and closed his eyes. A surge of guilt almost made him go limp as he started calling up images of the Jounin. What the fuck, man?! Was he really going to yank off while thinking about his *sensei?!*

The muscle under his fingers twitched at the memory of being caught and held briefly against Kakashi's chest, eliciting a gasp as he pressed his forehead into the tile wall. ...I guess that's a 'yes'... Well, if it was going to happen, then it better happen all the way because he was not leaving the shower without knowing exactly where his limits with this unhealthy fixation were.

He started stroking in his usual manner, slow and tight with a gentle little flick or twist at the tip. It didn't take long before he was immersed in the sensations, his skin tingling beneath the pounding water at his back. He imagined it was Kakashi's hands on him, and he scratched the washcloth across his chest as the mixture of frustration and strangeness threatened his rhythm.

Oddly enough, the harsh movement helped because Naruto could lean into his own heavy touch as if it were someone else's hand pulling at him. He remembered that look; that feral wild hunger, and he felt it echo and growl somewhere inside himself. He quickened his pace, refusing to be timid with himself as the fire boiled his blood and had him flicking his tongue against the tile wall to lick the water cascading down against his face.

This could be someone else doing this. This could be another person fighting and writhing against him. This could be Kakashi. What would he do? Fingernails dug into his shoulder, and he imagined they were teeth. He shivered and groaned, sinking lower into himself and bracing his leg against the wall so he could pretend there was a weight pushing on him. It would be heavier than him, fingers skating along his flesh instead of water, breath warming his neck instead of steam.

God, he was so close! He could feel the pressure building and he bared his teeth as he held back, loosening his grip and easing back on the furious pace of his stroking. Not yet. His entire body shook as his mind floated back into his head, tingling across every inch of his skin and making him moan loudly against the wall. His breath came quick, soft gasps of sound echoing in the small room as his desire to find release clawed at him.

Why did he have to be doing this alone?! Why couldn't Kakashi just *be there?!* Fuck! He squeezed his cock and turned up the pace again with ravenous determination. There was more to it than this. He pressed his shoulder into the wall. There would be weight on his back. He clacked his teeth against the tile, arching his neck and wishing it was salty skin he was tasting. There would be something the Jounin would want. He scratched the soapy washcloth around his hip, gripping the toned flesh and flinching slightly. He had to know his own limits or live his life waffling around reality.

Foam from a washcloth was hardly a substitute for lube, and he knew he'd need some. He was fairly sure about that from what he remembered of Ero-Sennin's sex talks. The problem

was, the 'talks' had always ended up devolving into the man giggling and blushing and nose-bleeding as he explained a whole lot more than Naruto really wanted to hear. Then another day he'd have to pick up roughly where he'd left off, and try to get as far as possible before he dissolved in the lurid details again. It had left Naruto with a somewhat convoluted and disjointed view on sex, and the distinct impression that 90% of what had been told to him was honestly better off forgotten.

But now he was stuck in his own convoluted and disjointed situation, and the bottle of lotion he needed was all the way in the other room hidden under his mattress. Damn it, he did NOT want to stop now and go get it! He was burning up with the ***need*** to keep going and the fucking soap was just going to have to be good enough! A thought suddenly struck him and he darted his hand out to knock over his shampoo from the narrow shelf built into the wall. It clattered to the floor and he quickly thumbed a generous helping onto his fingers with one hand.

It would work or it wouldn't, and he honestly didn't give a shit at that point because it was taking a lot of willpower not to be thrusting into his own fucking hand and he just wanted to cum already AND SERIOUSLY WHY THE FUCK COULDN'T KAKASHI JUST BE THERE TO HELP HIM OUT?! DID HE EVEN KNOW HOW FRUSTRATINGLY DIFFICULT THIS SHIT WAS?! OF COURSE HE DIDN'T! GOD DAMN IT! Holy shit, he wanted that man to be grinding up against him so bad it wasn't funny! Pushing and grabbing at him, hard muscles sliding along his back, that rumbling voice in his ear, licking and biting his neck, jerking him off and rolling his balls in those long nimble fingers!

He slipped his fingers around the puckered rim of skin and his foot kicked out at the jolt up his spine, finding purchase on the raised tile bordered around the shower. It was weird and exhilarating at the same time, and he had to pause a moment to almost soothingly rub the head of his dick while he got used to the feeling. He slid a finger in just a little ways, and stroked down on the rigid muscle beneath his other hand at the same time. Still weird, still a little exhilarating, really tight and slightly uncomfortable, but not unpleasant.

The waves of desire were still cresting under his skin, and he bit his lip as he rode them higher by carefully making his strokes a little faster. That wasn't his finger, that was Kakashi's. His body tensed up, shivering at the thought, and he slid his finger in a bit farther. He licked his lips and grinned wickedly. This was so lewd and dirty it made him want to laugh. Fuck it! *It was his god damn shower, and he'd do with it as he damn well pleased!*

Slowly Naruto eased his finger in more and then pulled back, then a little faster, and a little faster, and he wanted the pace to match the one stroking his cock because it was really starting to feel good, and strange, and sort of slick and bubbly and foamy because of the shampoo, but wow *good*, and he wanted to go deeper because his nerves were tingling and racing, and DEAR GOD WHAT WAS THAT?! His eyes snapped open and for a second he froze, rattling with the sensation of having brushed against something that over stimulated him enough to make him question whether or not it had been a good thing or a bad thing.

Oh yeah, that had been kind of an *amazing* thing! What the hell was that?! Panting and closing his eyes again, he swiftly resumed his rhythm. He had to find that again! Why couldn't he find it?! Fuck! Kakashi would know where it was because that sexy motherfucker

knew EVERYTHING, and one finger wasn't enough anymore, and he needed another because these would not be *fingers* in his ass if he ever pinned that fucking Jounin down, and he wanted to stroke faster, and fuck he wished he could be licking a set of abs instead of a fucking wall, and HOLY SHIT THERE IT WAS AGAIN!

Whimpering as he lost the sensation as quickly as he found it, he tried to push his fingers in deeper, but he was up to his knuckles, and it felt so fucking *good* having something sliding inside him, and he was so close to cumming, and he needed to FIND THAT FUCKING SPOT AGAIN, and he just wanted Kakashi there finding it for him, grunting and panting and thrusting and holding him like he'd never let go, wanting him and needing him, and getting their legs all tangled up until neither of them knew which part was whose, and he just wanted to scream the fucker's name until he was hoarse, wrapped up in his arms and blowing a load in his hands like he was about to do right fucking now, AND HOLY HELL THERE WAS THE SPOT, PLEASE GOD DON'T TAKE IT AWAY!

Naruto bucked his hips hard as his release overwhelmed him, choking out a cry of ecstasy and only just barely managing to not actually scream out the name that was on the tip of his tongue. The aftershocks vibrated through his frame as he stared at the wall with wide eyes. His mind was so unbelievably clear it was almost frightening, the shivers of electricity pinging across his body and whispering the reality of his fantasy.

He slumped forward as his muscles lost all pretense of strength while his mind reeled at what had just occurred. Crumpling to the floor of the shower, he lay on his side and continued to stare at the wall in utter disbelief while the water rapped against his sensitive skin. Bringing his hands up in front of his face, he looked at them for several long seconds as they were rinsed clean.

That...had just happened...hadn't it... Holy shit, he was so screwed. That was not supposed to have been a damn epiphany where he had the best masturbation fantasy of his fucking life! That was supposed to have been... Well, he couldn't really say what it was supposed to have been *specifically* because it had been a somewhat spontaneous event, but he could say for certain that THIS WAS NOT WHAT HE'D BEEN EXPECTING!

Pushing himself up to his knees, he plucked the forgotten washcloth and soap off the floor and wiped the wall so he could lean back against it without getting the sticky mess on him. The water fell on him like hot rain, and he rinsed the cloth off to lather it up with the soap again. He finished washing himself slowly, only half paying attention because he was desperately trying to figure out how he was supposed to go on living the normal life he'd once had.

So...did this mean he was gay, and he'd just never realized it till now? He tried picturing other men naked and waited for some kind of reaction. The reactions ranged from vaguely appreciative but uninterested, to completely neutral and uninterested, to cringing in horror and extremely uninterested. He tried picturing women naked, and found himself feeling somewhat similar about it. Although with the women he had a slightly higher interest factor, it wasn't enough to stir him now that he was flaccid and sated. No, he was definitely not precisely or strictly homosexual.

He tried picturing Kakashi naked, and then quickly jumped to his feet to turn off the hot water knob. Scowling down at his not-so-flaccid-anymore partner, he silently scolded himself as the cold water took care of his growing problem. Well, okay, so he was apparently gay for *one* guy. He still found women pleasing to think about, and he knew they could awaken his desire if he was in the right mood.

Naruto turned off the water and grabbed his towel to dry himself off thoughtfully. He figured that realization would make him bi, but that didn't seem right. He didn't lust after both sexes on equal terms, he...he just lusted after one person. He could fantasize about women, but if he wanted to be honest with himself he didn't actually want to *be* with any of them in the same way he wanted to be with Kakashi. Sure, they could get him off as an illusion in his head, but he didn't want to drown himself in them in every way possible inside and outside of sex.

He wanted that man. *Needed* him. *All* of him! Good, bad, ugly, beautiful, he had to have all of it! He wanted Kakashi's past, present and future, his body and his heart. Shit, this was going to make being around the Jounin excruciating. Finding a balance where he'd be satisfied, but without pushing the boundaries so far he drove Kakashi away wasn't going to be easy. He sighed and wrapped the towel around his waist before opening the washroom door and stepping into his apartment proper.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" Kakashi demanded angrily from where he was crouched on Naruto's open window sill.

"HOLY FUCK!" Naruto practically screamed, his heart stopping in shock as he jumped and scrambled back. His brain wasn't connecting, having snapped to a halt at the same time as his heart, and he tripped and fell hard back against his sink. "I'm not doing anything! Nothing with anything about anything!" Panic kicked his heart into overdrive. Oh god, what if Kakashi knew what he'd just done?! What if...wait a fucking minute! "What are you doing here?!" Naruto gasped, pulling himself to his feet and poking his head out into the apartment. "What do you mean-"

"*This* is what I mean," Kakashi growled, brandishing the ANBU mask from where he was now standing in the middle of the floor. His white cloak swirled around his legs as he threw his arms out furiously. "What are you doing with this thing?! *Why do you HAVE it!*"

"I found it," Naruto replied quickly. He could feel the color drain from his face as he stepped into the room, his eyes darting from the Jounin to the mask that was being so carelessly handled.

"*How* did you find it!" Kakashi grated through clenched teeth, gripping the mask tight with his fingers through the hollow eyes.

"It was at the bottom of the river, please don't break it," Naruto breathed, taking a step forward and lifting his hands a bit.

"You went *looking for it?!*" Kakashi stepped back, horrified and jerking his hand away as if he was going to throw the mask out the window.

"No, don't!" Naruto cried, reaching out his hands but keeping his feet planted. "You threw it away, I had to see if I could find it. Don't break it!"

"I threw it away for a god damn *reason!* I should have smashed it back then! And now you've got it like it's some kind of fucking *trophy!*" Kakashi railed.

Naruto stood there in silence, clenching his hands at his sides as his temper started to boil. Something wasn't right about Kakashi's outburst, but he couldn't figure it out in time to respond before the Jounin spun on his heel and ducked out the window.

Kakashi leapt over the rooftops until he was out of Naruto's neighborhood, then dropped to the ground and started stomping his way home down the empty dark streets. He was seething with a stomach-churning mixture of fury, disgust and a creeping sensation of dread. He was so tempted to crush that despicable mask in his hands and grind the shards to dust under his heel.

Naruto had touched it! God, he'd *touched the filthy thing!* He'd *cleaned* it! How the hell did he even *find* it?! It was supposed to be smashed in a thousand pieces at the bottom of a river! ***Why wasn't it?!*** Why did it have to end up in Naruto's hands?! *Naruto*, of all people! If the blonde hadn't obviously just stepped out of the shower, Kakashi might have been tempted to pin him down and scrub him clean himself just for handling that damn mask!

The worst of it was, he had no idea WHY Naruto had it in the first place! Tenzou's words nagged at the back of his mind, twisting the wire of dread into a knot in the pit of his stomach. He'd bumped into the man as they were both turning in their reports; Kakashi only just having returned to the village and Tenz- Yamato having finished the day with Naruto. The ANBU had looked at him flatly and said: 'He's all yours, and for the sake of my sanity just give him *something* to chew on. He's as relentless as Ibiki.'

Kakashi pressed the heel of his palm against his eye. He'd gone to Naruto's apartment after that on a whim, to find out what Yamato was talking about. The second he'd landed on the window sill he'd turned to leave, seeing the steam coming from under the washroom door with the lingering scent of soap. But his old ANBU mask was smirking at him ***from next to Naruto's fucking BED!*** Just sitting there propped up, leering at the fact that all the years of blood and death filling its hollow eyes stared at Naruto while he slept.

It was like everything was falling apart into this horrible nightmare where all his old ghosts came after Naruto instead of him, and he'd gone and flown off the handle. It didn't matter how much he tried, he couldn't stay emotionless around him. That irascible blonde had the most terrifying ability to punch holes in the walls around Kakashi with such ease! Those eyes and that damn smile had always been able to break him, but it was getting much worse now. He couldn't maintain his distance, he could feel himself leaning in and he couldn't stop *dreaming of him!*

He'd taken the week-long mission to try to gather his wits because he'd almost *kissed* the idiot! TWICE! He knew for most anyone else an 'almost kiss' was a lot closer than what he defined it as. But for him, just the aching *want* to do it had been far too close for comfort. He could count on one hand the times he'd willingly kissed someone, and he'd always done it to oblige the woman's desire. He *did not* actively seek out that kind of intimate contact, and

certainly would never do it outside of a very dark room in a village very very far away from Konoha!

The first time he'd lost his mind he'd been able to pull back and grab Naruto's elbow, turning his head to hide the absurd blush coloring his face after having Naruto clinging to his arm half naked and wet. The second time he'd been caught completely off guard and genuinely frightened at how Naruto had simply collapsed in front of him. He'd been so relieved when he felt strong arms wrapping around his neck, because that meant Naruto hadn't passed out. His knees had just buckled from running around all day. Then he'd ended up holding that lean body against his for a moment, licking his lips and turning away as he'd let go. Fuck, he'd had to crouch there and think about dead kittens so he could stand up without a bulge in his pants!

Scratching his fingers through his hair, Kakashi gave the mask in his other hand a dark look and dangled it precariously from one finger. He had enough problematic issues when it came to the young man, but *this* was getting too close to things he didn't want Naruto to ever even *think* about. He was going to have to face the blonde in the morning and he had to figure out how he was going to deal with this situation.

The bright flash of light in the dark street was enough to startle him out of his thoughts, but the fact that it was five feet in front of him and shouting furiously had him jumping back. He had a brief glimpse of Naruto's glowing silhouette, spitting mad and wrapped in his Biju Mode cloak, before everything went to hell.

The mask slipped off his finger, propelled up and over his head with the momentum of his movement. Whatever Naruto had been saying was instantly cut off with a choked cry of fright, and he lunged forward to try to catch the mask before it fell. Unfortunately, Kakashi was between Naruto and the mask, and the man was too stunned at what was going on to get out of the way fast enough. The golden aura slipped away as Naruto let his Biju Mode drop, and he didn't hesitate for a second to use Kakashi to boost himself up a bit so he could snatch the mask out of the air behind the Jounin's shoulder.

Kakashi was left stumbling backwards, his arms wrapped around Naruto's waist and legs as the young man kind of jumped on him and hooked one leg around his back to steady his balance. His face was pressed against a bare chest, and his brain started screaming information at him that he simply couldn't process or believe. The first thing that hit him was the fact that his fingers were gripping an unhealthy amount of *skin*. He let go immediately and kept stumbling back, his heart pounding in his chest as his face started warming up due to the flush of heat in his gut.

"You know what?! Fuck you! I'm keeping this!" Naruto hollered, clutching the mask and glaring at Kakashi as he advanced forward in his tirade.

Kakashi blinked and halted, only half listening to what Naruto was saying because what his eye was seeing was threatening to simply destroy his entire existence as his body reacted in a much more enthusiastic manner than his mind. Bare. Fucking. NAKED?! *ARE YOU SHITTING ME?!* His reflex was to cover the blonde up before anyone got curious about the shouting and saw him stark nude in the middle of the street. His cloak was the nearest available thing since he couldn't spot the missing towel anywhere nearby.

"You threw it away and I found it, so it's *mine* now!" Naruto continued as Kakashi jumped forward.

Kakashi's stupid clumsy fingers were already at the collar of his cloak as he wrapped his arm and the cloth around Naruto's shoulders, but he couldn't get the fucking clasp undone!

"And what are you doing?! You almost dropped it, I'm not giving it back!" Naruto tried to step back, pushing against Kakashi's arm which tugged at the fabric and made the clasp even harder to get unhooked. It also had the effect of tugging Kakashi along with it, and he tried to brace his feet and his arm without actually grabbing the bare shoulder pressing into his forearm.

"Can you just shut the hell up and stay still for a fucking second!" Kakashi hissed, desperately fumbling at the clasp with trembling fingers and trying to look anywhere but at the fantastically naked body standing inches away from him. God, he smelled so fucking good! He smelled like sunshine and sex! "Shit, you couldn't have gotten *dressed* before you decided to come after me and wake the village with your temper tantrum?!"

"Don't try to change the subject, I'm wearing a towel!" Naruto snapped, still trying to wriggle his way out from under Kakashi's arm.

"Not anymore you're not!" Kakashi laughed, the sound coming out with a somewhat hysterical edge. The fact that Naruto smelled like *sex* had brought a dawning realization which made his fingers go numb while his trousers were starting to get uncomfortably tight. He'd just come out of the shower when...oh god no...he did NOT walk in right after Naruto had-WHY THE FUCK WAS THIS CLASP NOT COMING APART?! FUCK IT, JUST RIP-

"Holy shit where's my towel!" Naruto gasped, grabbing the cloak and yanking it to cover himself up. He blinked up at the Jounin with wide horrified eyes as Kakashi was jerked forward against him. "...fuck!" He whispered, his face turning a delicious shade of pink.

"The clasp is stuck," Kakashi said, quickly looking away from those eyes he just wanted to drown in and whipping his hands behind his back to lock his fingers together. He tried to regulate his breathing, tried not to make it obvious he was on the verge of panting. "Just...get the cloak off me and take it!" Their bodies were too close! Way too close! Naruto's hip was bumping against his upper thigh, and the blonde's neck was flushed and right there begging to be tasted, and he could feel the heat of that bare body tingling through his clothes, and damn it he was so going to Hell!

"I'm trying!" Naruto replied, tugging at the collar. "The clasp is all bent!"

"Just rip it off!" Kakashi said through gritted teeth, swallowing back a groan as Naruto leaned in closer to inspect the clasp. Why did he have to smell so *good?!*

"But that'll ruin the-"

"Rip. It. Off," Kakashi growled, closing his eye and shivering slightly as Naruto's breath warmed the thin cloth at his neck and jaw. The collar of the cloak was promptly ripped apart, and the material slid off his shoulders. "I'll get it from you tomorrow," he said slowly and

carefully as he turned quickly on his heel. He took a deep breath as he pried his fingers loose from each other, and then started walking somewhat stiffly away.

"I didn't keep it as a trophy," Naruto said from behind him.

"It doesn't matter," Kakashi replied, stopping and turning his head slightly without looking over his shoulder. He did not want to have this conversation.

"I want to ask you about it, but I won't."

"Good." He did not want to have this conversation because he could feel himself breaking without even looking at the eyes he knew were watching him with that eerie clarity and stubborn compassion.

"I'm keeping it because it once belonged to someone who's precious to me."

"That's a stupid reason to hoard someone else's discarded trash," Kakashi sighed, clenching his fists and resisting the urge to press the heel of his palm against his forehead. He wanted to turn around and grab Naruto by the shoulders and shake him to his senses, wrap him up and hold him as close as he could, kiss him silly and scold him for being such an idealistic tender-hearted fool!

"One person's trash is another person's treasure," Naruto said, the smile clear in his voice.

"Don't leave it next to your bed," Kakashi said, looking up at the starry sky and wishing he wasn't so fucking *weak*.

"Why?"

"I don't want it watching you while you sleep."

"All right, I'll move it. You'll meet me at the bridge in the morning?"

"Yeah."

"Promise?"

Kakashi shook his head and let out a silent chuckle. Since when had the world decided to not only turn upside-down on him, but also run in a repeating circle? It was like they were back where they started months ago, except nothing was the same.

"I promise," Kakashi relinquished, lifting his hand and vanishing in a burst of chakra.

He went straight to the shower as soon as he got back to his apartment.

What's This Whole World Comin' To?

Kakashi stopped reading and tilted his head back to look up at what he could see of the night sky through the canopy of tall slender trees. He took a deep breath, focusing his senses to catch any unfamiliar scents or sounds. There were three...no, four men approaching, but they were a safe distance away and he had some time. Still watching the pinprick lights of the stars flicker between the arching branches above him, he idly toyed with the idea of summoning a shadow clone to take care of the nuisances out in the forest.

Letting out his breath in a quiet sigh, he dropped his gaze to the small campfire a few feet to his right. He could feel the warmth of it radiating pleasantly over his arm and side of his leg. The nights were beginning to get cooler as the summer was winding down, even though the days didn't seem to show any signs of slacking off in their heat. It was such a peaceful night, and it irked him to have it ruined by the clumsy bandits practically stomping their way toward him.

It would just take one clone, it was so tempting. Hell, he could probably summon Pakkun to deal with them considering how untrained and unskilled the small band of thugs were. But that would probably end in a somewhat loud scolding from the ninken, and that would defeat the entire purpose of getting someone else to do the dirty work so he could sit his ass there and enjoy the undisturbed night. The clone would be a better choice, but that would definitely end in a very loud scolding from the softly snoring presence leaning so damn comfortable and warm against his back.

If Kakashi wasn't under specific orders to the contrary, he would have summoned the clone and endured the eventual fit of temper from Naruto when he woke up in the morning. As it happened, he would be defeating the entire purpose of the boring C-rank mission if he indulged in his whim. The four men weren't close enough to be heard without concentrating, regardless of how much noise it felt like they were making to him, and they weren't putting out any serious bloodlust or murderous intent. Still, the itch of being surrounded was strong enough that it should be waking his *companion from his slumber soon.*

He resisted the urge to tense up, to shift his shoulders, to clear his throat, to do anything to warn Naruto of the approaching danger and wake him up early. It was a lot harder than he thought it would be, and he found himself tapping his finger lightly against the spine of his Icha Icha book in impatience. If the blonde's perceptive instincts were up to speed, he should be rousing himself right...about...now. There was a sharp intake of breath behind him, and the relaxed muscles of the young man's back twitched warily.

"How many?" Kakashi asked quietly.

"...four," Naruto whispered back after a few seconds.

"Congratulations, you pass."

"Finally!" Naruto crowed, throwing up his arms and arching back against the Jounin briefly. He summoned four clones and proceeded to shrug into a relaxed slouch, apparently having

no intention of joining his clones in the depressingly short 'fight'.

"You're not going to go celebrate?"

"Nah, I'm comfortable here," Naruto said, lifting a shoulder. "They can round up the thieves and take them back to that town to be locked up. It's the same as if I did it, anyway."

"Lazy ass," Kakashi said with droll humor.

"I learned from the best," Naruto snerked unrepentantly.

"It's so nice to know my years of teaching have not gone to waste," Kakashi said with a wry chuckle, drawing one knee up to rest his arm on it as the chakra from Naruto's clones faded into the distance with their respective captives.

"Man, it's going to be fantastic getting on real missions again," Naruto sighed happily.

"Indeed, and I will at last get you out of my hair."

"Tch, don't even act like you haven't had fun."

"I'll admit there have been moments," Kakashi replied nonchalantly.

"Such as...?" Naruto prompted, the impish smile clear in his voice as he tipped his head back and rested it on the Jounin's shoulder. "And the week you foisted me off on Yamato-taichou doesn't count."

"Well, there goes 90% of my reply," Kakashi said, allowing himself

a small smile at the way the soft blonde hair tickled his ear. "Oh, let's see...that fireworks incident was-" Naruto's head was off his shoulder in an instant, and Kakashi darted his hand back to block the head-butt with his book. "-highly amusing," he finished with a smirk.

"Places like that should be marked," Naruto grumbled, his muscles tensing as he crossed his arms in angry humiliation.

"It was marked."

"Marked *clearly*, then!"

"The words 'Fireworks Storage' were painted on the building in bright red and white letters seven feet tall."

"Shut up!"

"That would make the words taller than *you*," Kakashi said, giving the fuming young man a nudge.

"And you!" He retorted.

"Yes, but I saw them."

"Fireworks are supposed to be set off with *fire*, okay?!" Naruto snapped. "Not chakra! Who even designed that?! You are supposed to light the fuse with FIRE! *It's in the word 'FIREworks'!"*

"I don't suppose it would be a good time to mention the fact that we were told quite specifically about the village's unique way of making fireworks when we arrived," Kakashi drawled.

"No," Naruto growled darkly. "It would *NOT* be a good time to mention that..."

"Ah, well, don't let it upset you too much," Kakashi sighed lazily, fighting the urge to laugh. "We recovered the stolen documents safely, even if they were a bit singed, and you put on one hell of an impressive display that night for several potential customers who'd come to the village. The one's who commissioned the assignment even agreed to cut the compensation bill in half because of the contracts they'd gotten from the customers."

"That's hardly a consolation when it's still going to take me a year to pay them back," he replied dryly.

"Better than two years."

"You know, as team leader, shouldn't you have to take some responsibility?"

"Not when it comes to paying your collateral damage bills. A Genin you may be, but a child you are not," Kakashi said pointedly.

"Nope, I'm definitely not a kid anymore," Naruto chuckled, a subtle note of satisfaction in his voice as he again relaxed against the Jounin's back.

Kakashi almost regretted having said that, because now he knew Naruto had that look in his eyes. It was an odd searching curiosity that had become less and less hesitant over the last two weeks, ever since the overwhelmingly embarrassing debacle involving too much naked and a fight about an old ANBU mask. That look always pitched him off balance, teetering on a wire between raw panic and fear, and something warmer that he just wanted to fall into. He both hated and craved that expression, like a terrifying thrill he couldn't get enough of.

"Well, even if it was at the expense of my fragile ego and underfed wallet, I'm glad you had fun," Naruto said lightly.

And just like that Kakashi knew the look was gone, and he could relax and breathe again.

"I'm sorry...did you just say *'fragile'*...?" Kakashi asked, arching an eyebrow and settling his back to rest against the warmth behind him.

"Don't talk shit about my ego! I will have you know that it is easily bruised," he sniffed archly.

"Wow, it's a good thing you have all that self-confidence to shield your delicate flower of an ego," Kakashi grinned. "Otherwise it might wilt like a freesia without water."

"I am so going to kick your ass..."

"You have to catch me first."

"Caught!" Naruto sang, slinging his arms behind himself to grab the front of the Jounin's vest. The grip loosened almost immediately, though, and he pulled his arms back thoughtfully. "Everything's taken care of with the thieves. That bald guy in charge of everything said thanks, and there wasn't any need for us to return to the town if we just wanted to head on home."

"His name is Yonai-san," Kakashi sighed, tossing an exasperated look over his shoulder. "If you can't remember the name of your client off-hand, at least write it down so you don't inadvertently cause a political scandal."

"You knew who I was talking about," Naruto shrugged.

"Yes, but calling one of the wealthiest and most influential merchants in the Country 'that bald guy' is not something you should be doing!"

"Okay, okay. Tonai-"

"Yonai..."

"Yonai-san, then. Anyway, that's what he said."

"We can be back in Konoha by tomorrow afternoon if we leave early," Kakashi mused

"Sounds like a plan," Naruto yawned, shifting a bit to nestle himself against the Jounin's back. Kakashi was pretty sure he needed to be reminding Naruto that they had bedrolls for sleeping on, but it wasn't like he was uncomfortable sitting there. "Hey, Kakashi-sensei?"

"Hmm?"

"I had fun, too," Naruto said, and Kakashi could picture his drooping eyelids.

"That's nice," Kakashi replied quietly after a short silence, smiling to himself as he thumbed open his book and started reading.

"It is nice, isn't it..." Naruto's slurred voice trailed off as his body went completely slack.

It never ceased to amaze the Jounin how quickly the young man could fall asleep in any conditions or surroundings, nor how he could simply keep on talking all the way to the point that he did drift away. Astonishingly, he also tended to be a heck of a lot quieter, without all the restless tossing and flailing when he slept propped against his back like that. He shook his head and looked over his shoulder at the tuft of gently snoring blonde hair.

"Good-night, Naruto," he said softly, turning back to his book.

Kakashi managed to doze off for a few hours, though he couldn't fall into a deep sleep while they were out in the open. When dawn came, he rapped the spine of his book on Naruto's

head to wake him, and shortly thereafter they were headed back to Konoha. They stopped at a small dango shop for lunch, wherein Naruto announced defiantly that he was going to pay and Kakashi could sit at the table outside and wait.

Considering the Jounin had been the one to suggest they eat there, Naruto really should have known better. However, Kakashi complied with an affable shrug and lounged at the table until the blonde returned with the food. The second Naruto walked into the small shop to pay after they'd finished eating, Kakashi bolted into the trees and had to resist the urge to cackle at the furious shout coming from inside the building.

He couldn't say precisely when the strange game had started, only that it had somehow evolved into an actual game that was damn near as ridiculous as his rivalry contests with Gai. But he had to admit that this was a great deal more entertaining. The first time he'd paid for Naruto's meal without letting on he was doing it had been spontaneous. He'd felt a bit remorseful for having worked the young man so hard after handing his ass to him in that sparring match, and Naruto had offered to make lunch the next day for them both.

It was a polite gesture on his part, and he'd also been feeling slightly out of sorts at the time after the whole wanting to kiss him thing, as well as seeing the blonde's reaction to his stupid parody about his teeth. He'd been expecting a groan and a dark look, but he'd instead been rewarded with the bright carefree laugh he hadn't realized he'd missed so much. The second time was for the hell of it, because Naruto had done everything in his power to prevent the awkward air between them from fully forming the day after their humiliating confrontation in the street.

Then, somewhere between that second time and now, it had turned into this weird cat and mouse game where he would find all manner of surreptitious ways to secretly pay for Naruto's meal. It pissed the young man off to no end that he could never catch the Jounin in the act, and Kakashi found the eventual explosion to be terribly hilarious while he made his escape. As a side bonus - that he really was sure he should *not* be feeling so randomly pleased about - whenever Naruto got upset or angry enough he would unconsciously drop the 'sensei' honorific.

"GOD DAMN IT, KAKASHI, I TOLD YOU TO STAY OUTSIDE!" Naruto shouted, flashing into existence in a whirl of golden light and quickly matching the Jounin's pace through the tree branches as his Biju Mode faded away.

"I never left my seat," Kakashi smirked.

"I said I was paying, and you agreed!" Naruto continued in frustration. "You LIAR!"

"I didn't lie, you just offered to pay at the wrong time."

"That makes absolutely no sense!"

"Whose idea was it to eat there?" Kakashi inquired innocently.

"It was your-" Naruto's eyes widened, then narrowed to angry slits as he glared at the Jounin. "You bastard, you set that up!"

"Naruto, tree."

"Wha-"

There was a solid thud as the blonde slammed face-first into a tree trunk, and Kakashi continued on his merry way with a snerk. Another flash of highly irritated light had the young man hopping through the branches beside the Jounin again a few seconds later.

"Don't blame me because you fell into the trap," Kakashi chuckled.

"You are *unbelievable!"*

"For someone who was just complaining about me not helping to pay your bills, you certainly are upset."

"That's different!"

"Oh? How so?"

"Because I *want* to buy you dinner!"

"Why?!" Kakashi laughed in bewilderment.

"Why do you always pay for my meals?" Naruto shot back.

"The expression on your face is priceless," Kakashi replied with amusement. "So, why do you want to pay for mine?"

"I want to see the expression on your face," Naruto said thoughtfully, halting on a branch and scowling slightly as if he wasn't sure that had been what he'd intended to say.

"Save your pocket money," he drawled, stopping a tree ahead and putting his hands in his pockets. "You'll only see the same thing you always see."

"No," Naruto mused, leaping up to stand in front of the Jounin. "I want to see the expression on your face."

Shit, there was that damn look! His limbs froze. It was getting hard to breathe. He had to rely on every scrap of training he had to keep his features neutral, since he just couldn't tear his gaze away from that beautiful nightmare. Now he had to wonder if they were still talking about dinner, because that searching curiosity didn't seem to want to see his face at all. It was like those eyes wanted to look straight into him and see every damn thing he'd been hiding his whole life! Naruto moved an inch closer than the last time he'd faced Kakashi with that gaze, and the Jounin felt the panic start to override the iron hold he had on his expression.

Then Naruto's face broke into a blinding smile, like it was the best fucking day EVER. And everything was all okay because he hadn't seen anything, and nothing was wrong, and it was safe to breathe again even though he was still kind of close, but that was fine because he smelled *so god damn good*, and he could feel his fingers twitching in his pockets, and he really needed to take a step back at some point instead of sort of leaning in, because seriously

he just wanted to kiss the fool till he was a boneless pile of glee AND THAT WOULD LEAD TO BAD THINGS!

"One of these days I'm going to see that ugly mug of yours," Naruto grinned impishly, lacing his fingers behind his head.

Kakashi blinked as if a genjutsu had just been broken, then bent slightly over so he was eye-to-eye with the blonde.

"Not a chance," he said sweetly, then spun on his heel and began darting through the branches again. His heart was still pounding behind his ribs, but at least it was starting to settle down again.

"When I'm Hokage, I'll ORDER you to take that damn mask off!" Naruto laughed, following close on the Jounin's heels.

"And I will politely decline the Hokage-sama's attempt to perpetrate a gross infraction of my inherent personal rights as a citizen of Konoha," Kakashi replied drolly.

"...meaning...?"

"Meaning you'd be breaking the law if you did that," Kakashi said, glancing over at Naruto as the young man caught up to him.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Huh, I guess I'll just have to trick you, then," Naruto smirked.

"Good luck with that," Kakashi said sardonically.

Naruto simply laughed and let a companionable silence fall between them for the rest of their journey home. With Tsunade's seal of approval, Naruto was officially cleared for all mission ranks and they were both put back on the regular active duty roster. She had Kakashi stay to get a more detailed report, as well as give him another assignment he was sorely needed for. When he walked out of the building he was nearly pounced by the blonde, demanding to know how they were going to get together so the Jounin could finish teaching him the ANBU code. The only solution was a compromise; whenever they were in Konoha at the same time, they'd simply have to schedule something.

Of course, the instant 'How about right now?' response was thoroughly shot down because he was going to have to head out of the village shortly. The hot glare Naruto tossed at Tsunade's window was as endearing as it was frustrating, and Kakashi swiftly hauled the temperamental youth off by the back of his collar before he could do anything stupid. A firm shove in the direction of the blonde's apartment, and a well-placed lie about him smelling like an old unwashed gym towel had Naruto stomping his way home without further incident.

A few hours of getting himself cleaned up and resupplied, and he met up with the three other Jounin who'd been waiting for him at the East Gate. It wasn't until the third night he was on

watch alone that he started wishing he had a warm back to lean against. He lifted his forehead protector and did a quick sweep of the area with his sharingan before lowering the cloth over the red eye again. Rolling his shoulders back to loosen the tense muscle, he glanced at the three dark shapes of his sleeping teammates, then turned his attention to the black moonless landscape.

If things went well, they might complete the mission and get back to Konoha within two weeks. If he was lucky, Naruto would be back in the village the same time he-

Sighing and scratching the back of his neck, he halted that thought and looked down at his hands for a moment. What was he thinking?! He gazed back out at the vague shadowy nothingness that surrounded him and grimaced. It felt like he was sitting inside himself, and it scared him that he was no longer entirely satisfied with that state of being. He wanted something more. And what truly terrified him was the fact that the 'something more' he wanted sometimes looked at him as if he wanted something more as well. Except whatever Naruto was searching for, Kakashi knew he didn't have.

Reaching into his supply pouch, Kakashi fished around for the two little stones buried at the bottom. He didn't even try to convince himself to toss them aside anymore, it was a futile gesture. He couldn't deny the fact that his relationship with Naruto had changed, but he really couldn't say precisely *what* it had changed into. He certainly wasn't doing anything to stop it, or try to get it back to the way it had been. Hell, he was damn near encouraging it with his playful whims and that silly game, but he couldn't manage to stop himself when he was around Naruto. Like it was suddenly okay if he let his guard down and leaned back against the walls on the inside, pretending they weren't there.

Shaking his head, Kakashi exposed his sharingan and scanned his surroundings for any unwanted presences before covering it again. He looked down at the stones in his palm and put them back in his supply pouch, along with all the troubles they carried. His shift was almost over, and he was going to need to get some rest for the next day. Dwelling on the conundrum his life had morphed into wasn't going to help him sleep.

Five days later he was again on watch alone, his back slouched against the cold stone entrance to the shallow cave where the others were sleeping. The dull ache of a few forgettable injuries and minor chakra depletion did nothing to distract him from the sharper insistent ache of wanting that damn wall to be something warmer he could lean into. A hacking cough echoed in the cave, and he turned a pitying look at the restless figure trying to sleep off his fever. The man next to him stirred and reached out a glowing hand to hover it at his teammate's back until the coughing stopped.

They'd reached the cave at sunset and the medic had said that they'd be recovered enough from their injuries in a day, then they could set off again. He had not included his own recovery in the equation, and Kakashi had made the command decision to stay in the cave for two days. They were ahead of schedule anyway, and an extra day of recuperation could mean the difference between life and death when they made their final confrontation.

Four days later he was glad he'd made that choice, because holy hell they were *all* a pathetic raggedy looking bunch stumbling in the general direction of home. Mission: completed. Destination: Konoha. ETA: not fucking soon enough. When he sat watch that night he knew

he was in dire need of a very good night's sleep. He no longer wished he had a warm back to lean against, he wanted to curl himself around that limber body and just drink in the scent of him.

A silent chuckle escaped him at the vivid image his weary mind concocted. He couldn't even imagine the look on Naruto's face if he trundled up to the young man and asked point blank: 'Yeah, so can I just bury my face in your hair till I fall asleep? Cause I'm really *really* tired, and you smell way too fucking good.' It would be worth it just to see Naruto's expression, actually... Why the shit was he even seriously considering that?! Was he delirious?! It was like his subconscious was somehow being infected with Gai-cooties, yodeling with the Springtime of Youth and all that crap!

Kakashi shivered and rubbed his arms, pausing in his disturbing train of thought to stretch his senses out and scan the area. ...Springtime of Youth my ass...I'm in the Autumn of Middle-Age... What the hell was he even *doing* itching to get his fingers tangled up in the blonde hair of an 18 year-old?! The fact that said 18 year-old was also male didn't do much to dissuade him. He wasn't naïve about himself, he understood what his lust was capable of making him fantasize about and he'd never found a problem with it since it had never *been* a problem until now...

If he needed release he simply conjured up a couple characters from his books and imagined himself in the role he felt like playing. Maybe even both roles. What the fuck did it matter?! He was just along for the ride with a movie playing in his head until his thirst abated. It was always innocuous, an escape from reality just like the books. The only times he sought out a bedmate were when his craving and loneliness collided to an extent that he couldn't find real escape on his own. He could count on one and a half hands how many times he'd been in that state, when his desire to be needed and wanted outweighed his raw hunger.

He was inscrutably careful about his forays in more ways than just avoiding a substantial issue nine months down the road. He put a significant amount of distance between his destination and his home. His love for his home and his lust for companionship were two very separate things, and he wanted to keep them that way. There were no strings attached, he never gave his name, he liked the room very dark, and they would never meet again.

For one night he had another body all to himself, and he could close his eyes and pretend that it was his forever. His desire was to devour every inch of her and drive her past the brink of madness as far as he could, having her screaming and begging for more because she ***wanted*** him. His release was the smile in her voice and the feel of her clinging to him like she never wanted to let go because she ***needed*** him. His satisfaction was leaving while she slept with that smile still on her face, because for all the wrong he'd done in his life he at least did that one thing right.

That insatiable craving was clawing at him again, and the wire of dread laced in it felt like a snare tightening around his throat. There had never been a time when he wanted a specific person to be the body that eased the pain. 'Forever' lasted one night, nameless and faceless, then he would go home alone and be just fine with that! It was dangerous putting a face, and a name, and smile that wouldn't stop, and eyes as free as the sky, and a lean body he knew he could make writhe and arch in blind ecstasy for-

Kakashi scratched fiercely at his hair, forcing himself to focus his senses and sweep the area. Damn it, he sincerely needed to get home so he could crash in his own bed and *sleep*. It wouldn't be that difficult altering their course to a nearby village so they could rest at an inn, but he could practically taste the impatience radiating from his teammates even now. No, one more day away from home wasn't an option, even if they'd all feel better in the morning.

By the time they did make it to Konoha, they were still raggedy but at least they didn't look like a group of pathetic strays limping around half awake. Their last night out they'd run into another team on their way to a mission, and god bless them forever the fresh group had two medics and had happily volunteered to keep watch while Kakashi and his crew slept like the dead until sunrise. He dismissed the others to the hospital to get thoroughly checked out while he handed in the report and recovered scrolls.

It was too bad he couldn't hand in this particular report at the Mission Assignment Desk, because Iruka usually told him when Naruto would be back in town. Then again, he kind of didn't want to face the man due to the reasons he wanted to know the whereabouts of the blonde. After a scrutinizing look from Tsunade he was ordered home for two days of rest. Thanking his lucky stars for the time off as he stepped into his apartment, he lurched into his shower to scrub himself raw. Pulling the dark curtains over his window to block out the late afternoon light, he crawled into some clean nightclothes and promptly fell asleep for 12 hours.

Breakfast, laundry, a shopping trip through the market district, and Kakashi flopped on his bed with a contented sigh as he crunched on an apple while idly thumbing through one of his Icha Icha books. Today was a good day, and he wasn't going to think about how the sunlight creeping across his back and bare arms reminded him of someone else. He was going to enjoy his quiet solitude, and he wasn't going to think about how the light cool breeze smelled like windswept grass.

The enthusiastic knock at his door gave him a bit of a start, and he scowled as he pulled up his mask, wondering if his break was going to be cut short. Two steps across the room and he knew who was outside. His hand hesitated over the knob, but he brushed it off and opened the door. Naruto grinned up at him, wearing his casual clothes and looking good enough to eat. ...shit, I shouldn't have opened the door...

"Hey, Kakashi-sensei," Naruto chirped. "Baa-chan said you had the next two days off, so I stopped by to see if you were busy."

...ah, yes, the Hokage...instant mood-killer, THANK YOU GOD, because if that woman ever found out what I was thinking...

"I've only got one day off," Naruto continued. "So, I was hoping we could get together today some time? I've been trying to practice and remember what you taught me about the code, but I'm starting to get things confused," he muttered, scratching his head.

"Well, I'm not busy-"

"So, now would be a good time?" Naruto interrupted eagerly.

"...I guess so," Kakashi said warily, lifting an eyebrow and stepping back to somewhat reluctantly allow the boisterous young man into his abode. Naruto all but bolted into the small apartment, tripping out of his sandals and plopping down on the floor next to the bed. Fear suddenly zapped up the Jounin's spine. "Did someone give you coffee?!"

"What? No," Naruto laughed, giving the Jounin a perplexed look as he folded his legs in front of him.

"Oh, good," Kakashi sighed in relief, closing the door and ducking into his washroom to fill the teapot before setting it on his range.

"You were gone for a long time, was it a rough mission?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," he shrugged, leaning against the wall next to his 'kitchen' and sliding his hands in his pockets.

"You didn't get injured, did you?" Naruto asked, his face taking on a look of guilty concern.

"Not particularly," Kakashi replied hesitantly.

"Where are they?"

"What?"

"Your injuries, let me see," Naruto said, unfolding his legs and rising up on his knees.

"What?!" Kakashi would have taken a step back in befuddled indignation if he hadn't been leaning against a wall, so he settled for just staring at Naruto like the young man had gone mad.

"It's not chakra exhaustion, is it?" He asked, leaning forward onto one hand and looking for all the world like he was about to jump up so he could examine the Jounin himself.

"What the hell is going on in that crazy yellow head of yours?!" Kakashi demanded.

"You only just got back from a long mission," Naruto said, an odd note of worry and something almost like desperation in his voice. "If you're hurt or tired, and you'd rather be resting, or you *should be* resting then I shouldn't be here!"

"Oh, for the love of..." Kakashi groaned, dropping his head in his hand. "If I didn't want you here I wouldn't have let you in," he said, letting his hand fall and narrowing his eye. "Though, to be honest, I'm starting to rethink my initial decision."

"You're not in pain, are you?"

"It's turning into something of a pain, yes," he grated, turning his attention to the steaming teapot.

"Where?"

"Right there," Kakashi growled, pointing at the blonde before pulling a cup and small canister of tea from his cupboard.

"Eh?" Naruto blinked, then scowled and sat back on his heels. "That's not what I meant!"

"Does it matter?" Kakashi drawled, his eye starting to twitch as he tossed an apple a bit forcefully at Naruto, then stepped over with the cup of tea.

"Yes!" He snapped, catching the apple deftly and glaring stubbornly up at the taller man as he took the cup. "And don't tell me I'm acting like an old woman, because I don't even give a shit about that! I want to be here, but that doesn't matter because if you need me *not* to be here I'll leave," he said, giving the floor a belligerent look.

"And yet I get the impression I'll have to pull up the floorboards to get you out," Kakashi said wryly, folding his legs and sitting down in front of the sulking young man.

"I'll leave!" Naruto insisted, still not looking up while he hunched his shoulders and effectively gave off the aura of an immovable object.

"Riiight..."

"I will," he said, shaking his head and clutching the teacup and apple tightly as he set them on the floor at his side.

Kakashi tilted his head and quirked an eyebrow at the defiant display, amusement starting to pull at the corner of his mouth. He rested his elbow on his knee and leaned forward to prop his chin in his hand with a sigh.

"Naruto?"

"Yeah?" He mumbled, refusing to look up.

"You don't have to leave."

"Honest?" Naruto asked, lifting his eyes with tenuous hope.

"Honest," Kakashi chuckled

"Thanks!" All the tension washed out of the young man's frame in an instant, his beaming smile lighting up his face with a warmth that just didn't seem possible. It was like watching a sunrise after a stormy night, and suddenly the world was pristine and wonderful. Safe and beautiful.

In all truthfulness, Kakashi had absolutely no idea when he reached out. He didn't remember doing it, and only had a vague recollection of simply wanting to put his hands on either side of that bright smiling face. What he *was* aware of - in the split-second it took his brain to register the fact that his body may or may not have decided to declare independence and secede from the unified state they were supposed to be in - was that he could actually taste Naruto's lips through his mask.

FUCK!

Things Just Ain't the Same

Chapter Notes

WARNING!! THIS IS THE EXPLICIT SEXUAL CONTENT CHAPTER!! And I don't know how people write this stuff all the time, it's exhausting! *flops*

Okay, first things first: Even if you didn't read through the whole chapter, please read the author's note at the end! If you want to critique me in a civilized manner, have at it in a review. I WELCOME that stuff! If you want to flame me, send it in a PM. There's no need to vent your hatred and rage at me where other people have to see it, that's simply harassing the general public and I'll report you for abuse. Just cuss me out all you want to in a private message, and I promise I will read it but not reply unless you ask me to. Thanks! =)

I'm not going to lie, things will get graphic, romanticized, and emotional. There will also be flowery metaphysical prose, a lot of foreplay, and a dash of versatility. LOTS OF CUSSING! But you guys should expect that from me by now. :P So, if you have no desire to read any kind of sex-related drivel, you should skip to the next chapter. You've been warned.

All right, for those brave souls who would like to actually read the semi-safe crunchy bits around the creamy lemony filling, I bring to you another installment of The Friendly Neighborhood Yaoi Survival Guide! Put on your racing gloves, trooper, and have a glass of water at the ready. You may need it. This is a dangerous assignment, so be prepared to possibly get a little squicked out.

Here's what you do: Steady your nerves and try to enjoy yourself as you read, but STAY ALERT. You know yourself better than anyone, so you know what your tolerance level is. As soon as you start to feel the twinge of 'Aaaagh, must not read any more!', start scrolling BACK! That's right, scroll BACK UP! Don't hesitate! Once you've returned to your safety zone, go up to the menu bar and open the 'Find' or 'Find on this page' or 'Find and Replace' option.

What you're going to be searching for are quotation marks. These things: " . In other words, you're searching for dialogue. DO NOT LET YOUR GUARD DOWN! Seriously, I mean it. Don't just pounce on the dialogue like it's a safety net, because there may or may not be a very uncomfortable slippery texture on that safety net. Read with caution, and be ready to hit that little 'Find Next' button immediately if you feel your gag reflex coming on. Drink lots of water! That's about all the advice I can give you, soldier. Good luck! =D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Things Just Ain't the Same

Kakashi's eye flew open wide as horrified disbelief slammed into him at what he'd just done. He had a brief glimpse of furiously blushing skin and equally wide blue eyes staring straight at him from WAY TOO FUCKING CLOSE before he let go immediately, pulling back with a gasp. Well, at least he tried to pull back. The problem was there were fingers tangled in his hair with a frantic strength that set his blood on fire, and clumsy lips pressed hard against his and leaning in, hungry, *starving*.

In the back of his mind he started calculating how to go about teaching Naruto how to kiss while his body responded to the urgent touch, his hands sliding up the back of the blonde's shirt AND WHAT THE FUCK WAS HE DOING?! But Naruto had arched into his hands and loosened his fingers as he tipped his head back a bit and shivered, and Kakashi just wanted to slide his tongue across that exposed throat and BAD! STOP! NOW!

Untangling himself desperately, because *when the shit had he slipped his knee in between Naruto's legs?! Holy fuck this was bad!* He snatched Naruto's wrists and pinned his arms behind his back to keep those dangerous fingers out of his hair. Unfortunately, that left him temptingly close to his mouth. He had to duck his head to try to collect his wits because he could feel himself getting drunk off that god damn delicious scent, every inch of him aching and burning with the need to keep going.

"Wait," Kakashi rasped, panting and licking his lips as he shook his head.

He shouldn't have lifted his head and looked into Naruto's eyes. It was like looking into a sky-colored mirror reflecting his own desire. *...I want to **devour** you...* Things needed to stop happening so fast he couldn't keep track of what the hell was going on, because the breath skating across his mask inches away was delectably hot, and the weight creeping up his thigh felt *so fucking good* AND HOW THE FUCK HAD NARUTO ENDED UP THERE?! God damn it, what the shit was his leg even *doing* pressing those thighs apart and urging the blonde up into his fucking lap, and dear god he just wanted to grab onto him and ***eat him!***

"This isn't..." He tore his gaze away, searching wildly for something distracting, anything! Open window. Sunlight. HIS FUCKING APARTMENT! No, this shit was so absolutely NOT happening here and now! "I don't know what came over me!" His words tumbled out quickly as panic started chipping away at his lust. "This isn't what you-" Teeth gripped the side of his neck, and he clenched his jaw as his eyes rolled back and his spine tingled and curved to lean in, and seriously, leg?! What the fuck?! Stop bringing his crotch closer! "-think it is!"

The sound of fabric tearing was startling, but there was a tongue sliding along the skin of his neck, and his hands were already making their way up Naruto's arms instead of holding onto his wrists like they were *supposed to be doing!* Light. Too much light. Not here. Not here, not NOW! His stomach clenched at the idea of being exposed, but the heat building in his gut wasn't letting him focus on it because that demon's tongue was working its way swiftly across

his throat like an assassin of sex, tearing the cloth along the way, and if he got any harder he was sure his pants were going to rip the fuck open.

Growling and steeling what little will he had left, he grabbed Naruto's shoulders and forcefully pulled him back. Hands clutched at the sides of his shirt. Wait, why were they so close to the floor?! Gravity wasn't being his friend, because somehow he had ended up leaning forward enough to need to let go of one of Naruto's shoulders and prop himself up so he could keep himself from falling right on top of the blonde. Fuck, he wanted to fall so bad it hurt.

"Not happening!" Kakashi insisted, trying to figure out why he was still leaning in when clearly his brain was telling his body to *back the fuck up!*

But those blue eyes dragged him forward, ravenous and blazing with the heat boiling and echoing within himself, edging toward madness and drowning in a need so close to pain it was magnificent, because *he* was the need. Needed and *needing.* Nimble fingers raced in a quick circle around his neck, tugging and tearing the high collar of his sleeveless shirt that served as his mask to make it into two separate pieces. Fear gripped him as he saw those fiery eyes narrow slightly. Naruto was going to-

Kakashi jerked back, his protest muffled by the lips crashing into his with a ferocious determination that sat him back on his heels. Truly he meant to grip that lean waist and push Naruto *away,* but the synapses in his brain weren't firing right due to the electricity spiking up and down his spine from the *hunger* writhing beneath his skin, wanting to feast on the body vibrating beneath his hands, and what the hell were his hands doing UNDER NARUTO'S FUCKING SHIRT AGAIN?! AND GOD DAMN IT, WHY DID HIS SKIN HAVE TO FEEL SO FUCKING **GOOD?!**

Naruto tilted his chin down, pressed his forehead against Kakashi's, stared dead into the Jounin's eye with a furiously heated look that simply said ***'mine'***. Kakashi dug his nails into the toned muscle of Naruto's back, because all he wanted to do was fuck the scrumptious idiot into the floor and turn him into a limp liquidy heap of mindless satisfaction and life-altering euphoric ecstasy. Then the world went dark for a split-second while he panicked at the sensation of air hitting the bare skin of his face, and suddenly he was watching the blonde adjust the mask over his eyes to act as a makeshift blindfold, leaning back into the Jounin's hands so he could pull his bangs free and tuck the cloth behind his ears.

Kakashi's heart seized up so painfully he had to cough to get himself to breathe again. For a brief moment he'd thought it had all been a trick to get his mask off so Naruto could see his face. But it hadn't been a trick, and now he was so incomprehensibly relieved Naruto couldn't see him! Although he really couldn't understand the expression he felt pulling at his features, he knew he never *ever* wanted anyone else to see it.

With the slight pause in action and a respite from those damn eyes, his mind started to clear and he could think again. Holy shit, *he could think again!* He needed to take control of the situation and calm things down so he could straighten out the mind-boggling dream scape he'd been swallowed into. He could do this. He could-

"That's better, right, Kakashi?" Naruto asked, his voice a touch husky from his quick breathing. He tilted his head a bit and grinned like a fox, sliding the tip of his tongue over his front teeth as his fingers found their way back into the Jounin's hair.

-not even fucking resist that if his life depended on it...

"That's just playing dirty," Kakashi growled as he tossed Naruto's shirt aside, because apparently he'd stripped it off of him at some point. "You owe me a new shirt," he muttered, nibbling and licking his way up the blonde's throat. It was salty and sweet and warm and fuck he tasted so god damn good!

"It's s-standard issue - *damn it* - you cheap bastard," Naruto stammered, his fingers alternating from gripping fiercely at Kakashi's hair to going completely limp as his head dropped back and his body tried to arch in and press against the taller form that was kept just out of reach.

"I have to cut corners somewhere to pay for your meals, you bottomless pit," Kakashi hissed with a wicked smile, nipping gently at Naruto's earlobe and flexing his back to just let their bodies slide together like two puzzle pieces. Naruto seemed to sink into himself, grinding against the Jounin's upper thigh as his torso simply melted into Kakashi's chest and hands.

"God I hate you..." Naruto groaned, and Kakashi felt a shiver race across his skin at the way that voice reverberated through his own chest. The length of muscle pressed into his hip was as hard as he was, and at some point he really, *really should stop!*

"Who's the terrible liar, now?" He chuckled, which swiftly choked off as Naruto quivered against him, one leg clenching at his thigh as the other hooked around his hip to get better leverage.

Fingers tightened in his hair, and there was a clumsy mouth on his with a harsh clacking of teeth. Yeah, that needed to be fixed before they both ended up looking like they'd walked away from a bar brawl in Kumo. A delightful scroll of logic unfurled within his brain at the thought. Because kissing was okay, right?! As long as the pants stayed on, and he kept his itching fingers above Naruto's waist, then everything would work itself out just fine! IT WAS A FLAWLESS PLAN, RIGHT?!

Kakashi leaned back a bit, pulling his arms in so he could slip his fingers across Naruto's jaw and lace them in the soft blonde strands poking out beneath the back of the blindfold. The touch had the desired effect, as Naruto went a bit limp and relaxed his iron grip on the silver hair at the nape of Kakashi's neck. He used the heels of his palms to gently tilt the young man's head to a more conducive position, stroking his thumb almost soothingly along the outer edge of Naruto's ear.

The rigidly taught lips crushed against his own eased back with a sigh as Naruto's whole body just sort of sagged comfortably against him. A smile quirked at one corner of his mouth, and he tipped his chin to finally get that perfect angle. He flicked his tongue briefly between those slightly parted lips, carefully urging them open farther as he deepened his kiss. Naruto tried to lick his lips at the sensation, and Kakashi slipped his tongue a bit further in to stroke

against Naruto's, teasing, tasting, leading, and sliding until the blonde's tongue was darting eagerly past his teeth.

He'd meant to keep it all low-key, figuring the time it would take him to teach Naruto how to kiss would give them both a chance to cool their heels a little. Except Naruto was picking up on the gist of it way too quickly. Dear god why did he have to taste as good as he fucking smelled with his breath hot against his cheek and in his mouth, like breathing in a taste of heaven. And those fingers were twining and slipping through his hair just to slide down the back of his neck and scratch at his shoulder blades to pull him forward, closer, deeper. He had to shift his arms a bit to cradle Naruto's head off the floor, AND HOW THE FUCK DID THEY END *UP ON THE FLOOR?!*

"Not good," Kakashi murmured against Naruto's mouth, willing his body into motionlessness before his hips got any lower. So close. So fucking oh my god so close!

"I'm improving," Naruto replied, gentling the light nip he gave the Jounin's bottom lip with a flick of his tongue and a brush of his lips while he snaked his fingers down Kakashi's back.

"Fuck me..." Kakashi groaned, feeling his knees slipping and his body just *needing to get closer.*

"And here I thought you were playing hard to get," he grinned, dragging his nails up the Jounin's spine and lifting his head to silence all the talking.

Kakashi arched into the touch with a strangled noise, hunching his shoulders as his mind blurred with desire and he plunged ravenously back into that sinfully grinning mouth. Fingers grabbed at his hair, trying to get him impossibly closer while his hips came down and pressed into Naruto's groin. Muscle on muscle, the hardness a direct contrast to the slick supple ones darting in and out, sliding and caressing wantonly. He was aware of a noise coming from Naruto's throat, almost like a whimper, and his hips rolled forward slowly to heed the wordless request as he felt the weight of legs hooking around his waist.

VERY FUCKING BAD!

"Out! NOW!" Kakashi gasped, jerking his head to the side and trembling with the effort of just trying to stay perfectly god damn *still.* "I mean it, get out!"

"Kakashiiii...!" Naruto snarled through clenched teeth as he clawed at the Jounin's shirt and arched his back, dragging out the last syllable and tilting his head back like he was trying to drink the sound in and swallow it.

Why did Naruto have to say his name like that?! Because there was no way he could know that was what he dreamed about nearly *every. Fucking. Night!* It felt like his heart was splintering. *Oh god, why did it feel so good to hurt so much?!* He rocked forward again slowly, shifting his weight a bit so he wasn't simply grinding and crushing. The legs wrapped around him tightened and trembled. This was what Naruto wanted, what he *needed*.

...me...he needs *me*...

The lean body beneath him writhed, panting and mouthing soundless words, scratching at him and surrendering, commanding and begging. ...mine... The heat flaring and scorching his own body could wait while he slid one hand down the lean thigh slung around his hip, maneuvering to get them aligned just right. ...*mine*... He eased his own throbbing hunger by resting his head on the floor next to blonde's, drinking in that heady scent of sweat-tangy windswept grass, sunshine and sex, and skating his teeth across that bare neck. ***...mine...***

He had to keep his pace slow or he'd lose it, flexing his back and letting his whole body just rub against the heaving frame beneath him till he rolled his hips with that final careful grinding between legs that were rattling against his sides. Naruto was so close to losing it he didn't need to speed up, and he honestly didn't *want* to speed up. He wanted to relish every second, licking and nibbling and sucking on that arched neck where he could taste the swift pulse. Where he could feel the sounds tingling across his lips and tongue of a voice making garbled nonsensical noises that were getting deliciously louder, fantastically louder.

The fingers in his hair trembled and twitched, wandering blindly to pluck and yank at his shirt because they just didn't know what to do with themselves anymore, and the pelvis under him squirmed and tried to lift and buck while every inch of that lean body silently shrieked faster, *faster,* ***faster, I need more!*** There was a moment of wild quaking tension in Naruto's frame as he swallowed and dug his nails into Kakashi's back, trying to lift himself off the floor and press into the taller man's body with every ounce of his being. Kakashi licked his lips and snaked an arm beneath the blonde to hold him close and tight, never pausing his steady pace to send Naruto over the brink.

It was the sound of his own name being screamed out that damn near broke his focus and control, that had him moving faster and harder against the body clinging and clawing and shouting in his arms. He came around to himself at the sound of ripping fabric at his back and the salty smell of Naruto's release. Panting harshly, he willed himself to ease to a gentle halt of motion and shifted back a bit so he didn't feel like he was crushing the limp pile of bones grinning like a goofy satisfied cat on his floor.

On his floor smelling sticky and warm like a fresh meal. Fuck! On *his floor* with the sunlight glowing like a halo around his head. FUCK! *On* ***his floor*** smiling and licking his lips because his throat was dry from- *FUCK!* Kakashi's arms tensed instinctively and he hunched his shoulders as if he could somehow hide Naruto, snapping his head toward the OPEN WINDOW and stretching out his senses.

...SHIT...please, god, don't let there be anyone out there...

A nightmarish image flashed into his head; of standing in front of a hellishly enraged Tsunade, and not being able to come up with any kind of reason or excuse for his actions other than pointing at Naruto and saying 'He started it!'. Which just begged the question 'How?!', and his only answer was 'He smiled at me!'. Yeah, because that's a TOTALLY VALID reason for dry-humping *her little brat* into a screaming orgasm! God damn it, he wished he didn't want to do it again...and again...and again...and why couldn't he just not be *so fucking hard* right now thinking about it...

"You worry too much, Kakashi," Naruto whispered in his ear, his lips and the tip of his tongue brushing the edge.

"I have very good reason to worry," Kakashi growled, feeling his skin prickle and buzz under the surface, his fingers twitching against smooth damp flesh as his arms relaxed.

Naruto snorted softly, the hot breath tickling the Jounin's neck as lips worked their way down his throat. He tried to hold onto the frightening image of his awaiting doom, but there were warm hands sliding up the back of his shirt following the lines and dips of muscle. ...just once...just today I want this to be mine... Those fingers moved like they were memorizing everything they touched, and he could feel his blood racing. ...why can't he be mine... They were searching, tracing and caressing the varying texture of old scars almost possessively, and everything ached so much. ...mine forever... The wandering fingers lifted before they got to his shoulders, and the rending of fabric was greeted with a devilish grin from the blonde.

"You're going to be the death of my wardrobe," Kakashi sighed, shaking his head and giving the end of Naruto's nose a gentle nip.

"It needs a good resurrection, anyway," Naruto snickered, snapping his teeth playfully at the Jounin's chin and wriggling the ripped shirt off the man as Kakashi unwound his arms from beneath the blonde's back and head.

"Which would probably include an overabundance of the color orange if you did it," he said wryly. "Thank you, but I politely decline."

"What's wrong with orange?"

"On you, it has a bizarre way of working," Kakashi said, brushing his lips over Naruto's before neatly avoiding the eager response and darting his tongue out at the blonde's chin. "On me, it would just be hideously bizarre."

"Tch. Well, I think it looks mighty fine on you," he said impishly, slinging his legs around the Jounin's waist to illustrate his point.

"Says the blind man," Kakashi grinned, opening his mouth and wrapping his lips around the front of Naruto's throat so he could scratch his teeth against the soft flesh ever so gently while he circled his tongue around his adam's apple. Naruto groaned, the vibrations tickling Kakashi's lips.

"I-I could take it - *fuck* - o-off, you know."

"I know," he murmured, tasting the blonde's collarbone and dragging his hands down Naruto's sides as he crept his body back down the floor without finishing the sentence out loud. ...but you won't...

The lean muscle trembled and jumped beneath his fingers, and he slowly worked his way back up to find the specific places that brought out such an appetizing response. Heels dug into the small of his back, pressing insistently, and hands grabbed at his shoulder blades, trying to pull him back to where he'd been. His fingernails traced a line of sensitive skin from hip to ribs, and he scraped his teeth hungrily on the center of Naruto's chest at the writhing keening reaction his touch evoked. The noise rolled and caught in Naruto's throat, somehow

forming into Kakashi's name and just *sliding* off his tongue like a dirty secret dipped in chocolate.

Wow, that was not something he wanted anyone else in the world to hear for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the fact that he needed to press into the floor for a few seconds to ease the twitching, aching, burning, holy shit his name sounded so fucking good coming out of that mouth, all drunk and furious with desire. Forming the necessary seals wasn't easy with fingers that didn't want to stop mapping out that body, but he clenched his teeth and went through the motions correctly the second time so he could put up a sound barrier around his apartment.

He shrugged out from under the grasping fingers, slipping to the side with a wicked chuckle so he could kiss and lick his way around the firm pec on his right till he reached the pert nipple at the center. A lewd tonguing of the puckered skin, and the heels at his back hooked together so the hips attached could lift and grind against his stomach while fingers gripped his shoulders for leverage. The hard flesh rubbing at his abs was almost tempting enough to slither back to the half-open mouth just panting to have his tongue sliding in there, but he simply licked his lips at the swift recovery of the energetic young man and turned his attention to the untasted skin on his left.

Kakashi halted for a moment as his fingers explored ahead of his mouth, pushing himself back so he could get a clear view of Naruto's exposed chest. He hadn't actually looked at it before, too focused on the blonde's lips to let his gaze drift. Something twisted painfully beneath his sternum. The tanned skin was supposed to be flawless like it had always been! He'd seen enough of it at the local hot springs, as well as standing dripping wet in his apartment earlier that very year to know that irrefutable fact. *So, why was there a scar?!* The pain fractured and sent shrapnel throughout his torso. Death wasn't allowed to leave a mark on that body! *Not ever!*

The idea that the life clinging to him and laying in front of him could be taken away permanently was inconceivable. He traced the edges of the scar with trembling fingers, wishing with all his soul that it would disappear. He could feel himself starting to shake, knowing *all* of it might disappear forever one day, and he pressed his lips against the evidence of how fragile that indestructible life was. Fingernails scratched delicately up the nape of his neck, impatient and lively, pulling him back to the present.

The fires smouldering in him crackled and snapped, scorching his body and mind, and just *needing* the life under his hands, tangled in his hair, wrapped around his waist. He wanted that body squirming and shouting again, laughing and screaming in pleasure, languishing in the vibrating madness of untapped ecstasy, magnificently alive and radiant. Enough to let him breathe it in and feel like just that one memory could drag him back from the depths of Hell.

He slid his left hand up and over Naruto's shoulder while he tasted his way down his chest. Following the twitching muscle down the tanned arm to trace the relaxing curve of his wrist, he wriggled his fingers under the blonde's palm. He lifted the hand out of his hair and laced their fingers together before resting their hands on the floor. His right hand meandered down over Naruto's hip and leg, grabbing his knee to try to pull it off his back.

The instant resistance made him smile, with legs tensing stubbornly and fingers gripping tight at his hand. He carefully curled his knuckles into the tender flesh at the underside of that knee while he placed soothing little kisses on Naruto's abs, reassuring the blonde that he had no intention of going anywhere. The muscles under his lips hitched at the uneven gasping coming from the young man, and his leg went limp in Kakashi's grasp so he could unhook it from around his waist and set it on the floor.

His other leg was left there, a comfortable weight on his lower back. Now he had some room to work with. His brain was starting to get smoky from the musky salty-warm scent of the tangy skin he just didn't want to stop feasting on. He ran his hand up that lean thigh, the cloth of Naruto's trousers rippling and folding under the pressure of his thumb on the inside of the muscle. Naruto's shoulders came up off the floor with a strangled noise, and his whole body tensed and shivered. Ah, found another spot.

Smirking, the Jounin dipped his tongue into the heaving navel and gave it a nice long deep and dirty kiss. Naruto's fingers left his hair as the blonde propped himself on his elbows and arched his back before flopping to the floor and thrashing a bit in frustration.

"That's not - *nngg* - fair! Get that god damn tongue of yours back up here! FUCK!" He shouted, yanking on Kakashi's hand and scratching at the floor with his unoccupied fingers.

"My tongue is busy with other things," Kakashi said sweetly, dragging the appendage in question lazily around Naruto's navel. "Leave a message and call again later."

"So fucking dead," Naruto growled as he reached down with his free hand, and Kakashi quickly caught the hand and laced his fingers there before ducking his head with a mischievous laugh. "Come up here, damn it, I'll k-ahh-*hhaaa!"*

Naruto bolted up, panting and quivering and gripping the hands bracing him as Kakashi wrapped his mouth around the cloth-covered hard flesh between his trembling thighs.

"See? Busy..." the Jounin sang, working the button on the blonde's trousers free with his mouth before dragging the zipper down with his teeth. "Naruto?" Kakashi asked, letting the name roll off his tongue. He chuckled and took the unintelligible jumble of sound the blonde responded with as a 'Yeah?', loosening the fingers of his right hand from the death grip Naruto had him in. "Can you reach the drawer of my bedside table behind you?"

After a nod and a nonsensical noise of affirmation, Naruto leaned back to search for the small piece of furniture while he held onto Kakashi's other hand to keep himself from falling to the floor. Kakashi slipped his free fingers under the waistband of Naruto's brightly colored boxers and swept his knuckles slowly across the skin from hip to hip, lingering slightly at the texture of short soft hairs at the middle. Naruto started making louder noises and dropped to his elbow to catch his breath, just a few inches from finding the handle of the drawer. Even though Kakashi couldn't see his eyes, the expression the young man gave him was obviously seething with fury.

"You almost had it, it's right there," Kakashi said affably, tugging Naruto's boxers down over one hip and kissing the exposed flesh. "Of course, it might be empty. I can't really remember if I put anything in it or not."

Growling and mumbling between pauses to gasp and moan before resuming his wriggling and reaching, Naruto managed to find the drawer handle while simultaneously getting helped out of his pants, though Kakashi only brought them down to his knees. He didn't look up at the shuffling of irritated and impatient fingers searching blindly in the drawer while he kissed and licked the salty mess on the skin and curly hairs around the stiff muscle he was idly tracing up and down with his fingertips.

Whether or not Naruto came back empty-handed was entirely up to him. There were just so many things they could do without actually going all the way if they had-

Abruptly that warm body scrambled out from under him as quick as a flash and a strong hand grabbed his arm, hauling him up, yanking at the other hand still twined in fingers digging harshly into the backs of his knuckles, snarling and cussing like a whirlwind. There were lips on his, hot breath warming his cheek and in his mouth, a tongue sliding voraciously along his, demanding, insistent, refusing to be denied.

Kakashi's heart tapped out a staccato beat behind his ribs as his mind clouded over, and he drank in the fires of the life he wanted to burn in forever. Lunging forward up into the body still tugging at him fiercely, he felt his knee hit something and soak his calf with cold moisture. Crap, the tea. Fuck it. Clean it later. He was busy sticking his tongue in Naruto's mouth and trying not to cum, because that fantastic body was stripped of all clothing, scrabbling to get into his lap, and *vibrating with **want.***

"I swear to god...you're going to...if you don't...just dead...and not ever..." Naruto babbled angrily between getting lost in kissing, fumbling and pulling at the drawstring of Kakashi's slacks while also trying to get his body pressed against the taller man's. It was all a bit too much, unfortunately, and he gave an enraged shout as he set his forehead on Kakashi's shoulder, shivering and gasping.

"Slow down, Naruto," Kakashi panted, blinking and trying to clear his head as he twined his fingers in the soft blonde hair around the blindfold. It suddenly occurred to him that maybe that should come off at some point... "We don't have to-"

His hand was knocked away from the blindfold, something was shoved into his palm, strong fingers grabbed the back of his neck, and Naruto lifted his chin to jerk his arm back toward himself and press his forehead against the Jounin's.

"SEX! NOW!"

...thank god I put up that sound barrier... "Just wait a min-"

"YOU'RE AS HARD AS A FUCKING ROCK!" Naruto shouted, hunching over and sucking air through his teeth as his body gave a violent tremble.

"That's not what I meant," Kakashi grated, fighting the urge to roll his hips forward to meet that tempting naked form, but Naruto was making any thought of resistance difficult by scraping his teeth down his neck and tugging frantically at the waistband of his slacks with his free hand. "God damn it, give me a fucking minute!" He growled, pitching forward and pinning the cussing wild animal beneath him on the floor. "You're not ready yet!"

"I've been ready for over a month, *stop **hesitating!**"* Naruto snarled, wriggling his legs up and hooking his toes and heels at Kakashi's waistband so he could drag the clothes off him while he kept a firm grip on the wiry hair at the back of the Jounin's neck.

"Again, that's not what I meant," he replied as he tried to focus on popping the lid off the bottle in his hand as well as kicking his pants the rest of the way off.

It was hard doing everything with only one hand, but he was sure he'd need a crowbar to pry Naruto's fingers loose from his. And, to be honest, he really didn't want to let go of the blonde's hand anyway. There was an underlying desperation to Naruto's grip, a whisper beneath the howling rage of 'I'm not letting you go!', something that sounded more like *'Don't let go of me!'*.

"Then tell me what you *do* mean, god damn it! I'm not made of glass, and don't you even make me go into Sennin Mode to prove it!"

"You couldn't do that right now if you tried," Kakashi said wryly, finally getting a generous amount of lube onto his fingers before snaking his arm between Naruto's thighs.

"Fuck you! *I will pound your ass into the floor!"*

"Promises, promises," Kakashi hissed, biting the junction where Naruto's neck met his shoulder as he raised up on his knees a bit so the blonde's hips lifted slightly off the floor while those legs were still latched around his waist. Even as slick as his finger was it slid in a lot easier than he was expecting, and he looked wide-eyed at the arching body practically sobbing in a mixture of frustration and relief. "You devious imp..."

"Don't blame me. You're the one making me spend so much damn time in the shower every morning," Naruto leered remorselessly, licking his lips and pulling the Jounin in so he could do more entertaining things with his tongue.

Naruto was getting way too good at kissing. Seriously. Way. Too. Fucking. Good. It was a fabulous distraction that let him set a gentle pace with his hand while he tried not to think about how he was lowering his hips until he choked back a groan at the toe-curling sensation of brushing up against something hot and hard. Muscle quivered around his fingers as Naruto reacted in a similar manner. A grin twitched at the corner of his mouth as he tangled and caressed that nimble tongue, then started gently curling his slow rhythmically sliding fingers one at a time to find that sweet spot.

...one... Naruto bucked his hips, scratching at Kakashi's shoulder and making a spine-tingling little noise at the back of his throat. ...two... The blonde's hips jerked again, rolling and grinding against Kakashi's crotch and arm, slippery with sweat and pre-cum. ...three... Naruto arched his neck back and choked out a cry, the movement curving all the way down his spine. Kakashi attacked the bared throat hungrily, sinking his teeth delicately into the tender flesh and sucking on it when the blonde started growling as he pulled his fingers and hips away to snatch up the bottle again.

A few messy, blind and tense seconds later, and he was satisfied at the dripping slick texture under his fingers. Well, this was going to be interesting; one hand laced and tied up with

Naruto's and the other a lubricated mess. He gave the rigidly trembling neck under his lips an apologetic kiss for leaving it, then hooked his elbow under Naruto's knee to shrug the leg over his shoulder and hoped that would give him enough leverage and control. He wanted to go slow and careful, and he was dreadfully aware of the fact that Naruto wasn't going to tolerate any of that bullshit if he could help it.

Using his hand to guide himself to press against the slick opening, he leaned on his other elbow and slid only the head in. Naruto jolted beneath him with a gasping cry, clenching every muscle in his body and slinging his arm around the back of Kakashi's neck so he could bury his face in the man's unoccupied shoulder. For a horrifying moment Kakashi thought he had hurt him, and he froze. Then there was guttural shout from Naruto followed by warmth splashing against his stomach and chest. The blonde panted and sagged into the floor with a furious blush turning his already flushed skin a darker shade of embarrassment. Kakashi tilted his head in astonishment, blinked, and started laughing.

"Fuck!" Naruto raged, letting his arm fall off the Jounin's shoulder and slapping the heel of his palm on the fabric covering his eyes.

"So, how was...your first time?" Kakashi choked between gales of helpless mirth, letting Naruto's boneless leg slide off his shoulder while he rested his head on the floor next to the blonde's. "Was it everything...you thought it would be?"

"GOD DAMN FUCK SHIT!" He howled, bringing up his other arm and banging Kakashi's knuckles against his forehead. "This is *your fucking fault* for taking so god damn long!"

"I keep telling you not to be so impatient, but you never listen," Kakashi snickered, taking deep breaths as his laughter abated. Lifting his head, he reached out for the tattered remains of his shirt to wipe off his free hand before cleaning the mess spilled over the both of them.

"Shut up! If you leave me now, I seriously will beat the shit out of you," Naruto snapped. "Don't you dare even *attempt* to think that this is over!"

"Oh, I have as much faith in your recovery and stamina as I have in my endurance," he chuckled, setting the soiled rag aside and stroking the backs of his fingers along the markings on the blonde's cheek.

"What the hell are you even made of?!" Naruto demanded sulkily, turning into the touch.

"Jounin material," Kakashi grinned.

"Bite me, jackass!"

Kakashi obliged the waspish retort, putting a mark on the opposite side of Naruto's neck from the one he'd made earlier. Naruto hissed as he curved his neck and arched his back to lean into the Jounin's mouth, dragging his feet up the backs of the taller man's thighs. Heat danced tantalizingly across his skin, but he jerked his head back when he felt himself just starting to slip farther in. He darted his hand down to grab Naruto's hip to stop the motion as he put his weight on his other elbow. While the blonde was certainly starting to recover, he wasn't completely there yet, and Kakashi wanted him fully ready before they went any farther.

"Patience, Naruto," he murmured, tasting his way up the young man's jaw and burning with delight at the shivering response Naruto gave at the sound of his name.

Naruto tensed stubbornly and tried to push back against the Jounin's hold, calves sliding across his lower back, and Kakashi silenced the inevitable protest by flicking his tongue along Naruto's lips. The blonde lifted his head to catch the tongue, and Kakashi deepened the kiss as he eased him back to the floor while smoothing his thumbs in small circles at hip and heel of palm. Naruto's tension shifted and redirected as the taller man pressed his chest carefully but firmly onto the body beneath him.

Naruto's spine and pelvis relaxed into a curve that melted against the Jounin's torso while those fingers stroked the back of his neck, and the only thing that needed to be thought about was how to get that tongue deeper until they could somehow swallow each other up. He fought the burning urge to move, to match the pace of their tongues sliding in and out, twisting and playing, hungry and urgent, just needing to feel that muscle slipping across sensitive skin, searching and caressing. He waited patiently, feasting on the taste of the blonde's mouth until the length of pressure against his stomach became stiff and rigid.

Keeping his hand at Naruto's hip, he gripped it and lifted it slightly as he gently rocked forward a bit. Lightning fizzled up his spine at the enveloping warmth, and he could feel a groan vibrating through his chest, though whose it was he couldn't be sure. Kakashi eased back but not out, and then traced the inside of Naruto's parted gasping lips with the tip of his tongue to remind the blonde that there was something there in need of attention.

That ravenous mouth was on his in an instant, thank god, because *he* needed that small distraction as he rocked forward a bit farther into hot, tight, slick, holy fuck have to just keep that slow pace, in and back, can't even believe how good he tastes, a little farther each time, carefully, how the fuck can he do that with his tongue, muscles wrapped around him everywhere quivering and clenching and melting, and he needed to show him that he damn well knew how to use his tongue too, because he was in far enough and just needed to not, damn it, not move for a minute.

Kissing was beginning to get a little challenging due to the smile that kept on pulling at his lips, refusing to be suppressed and only widening every time he tried. He'd never felt so warm before; warm sun on his back, warm fingers laced in his hand, warm legs wrapped around him, a warm palm sliding down his jaw and cheek, warm lips on his, a warm damp body under him where he could feel the heartbeat through his chest, and inside the warmth feeling closer than he'd ever come to another person.

It wasn't helping that Naruto was brushing a curious thumb at the corner of his mouth, the concentrated tension in his face shifting to a smile of his own and making kissing pretty much impossible without a lot of teeth involved. Kakashi pulled his head back and brought his hand up to run his fingers along the edge of the blindfold. His mask. His smile faltered. Naruto was wearing his mask for him.

How it was even humanly possible to feel as if he could breathe easier than he'd been able to since...since god only knew when, and yet somehow not actually be able to breathe was completely beyond him. Total confusion aside, the fact remained that he really should take that blindfold off regardless of his lingering trepidation. Naruto tilted his head thoughtfully,

his thumb still at the edge of the Jounin's lips, then grinned wickedly and snapped his teeth sharply at the man's fingers.

Kakashi flinched his hand back out of range before he got bit, opening his mouth to say something. Except all that came out was a strangled gasp as Naruto tilted and rolled his hips to get him a little farther in, arching his neck back and choking out a laugh. The warmth turned to heat, sinking into his veins as he gave the devilish creature under him a toothy grin and nipped at the thumb still at the corner of his mouth. Circling his arm around Naruto's back, he lifted him up and slid his knees under himself so he could sit back on his heels with the blonde sitting on his parted thighs.

"Are you trying to tell me I need to do all the work?" Naruto smirked, panting heavily and already starting to subtly rock his hips as he settled himself on the Jounin's lap.

"Nope," Kakashi replied, turning his left hand palm-up and holding it steady just beyond the blonde's hip where Naruto reflexively leaned into it to brace himself. "I just thought you'd have more fun if you had room to flail," he said with a playfully malicious chuckle, tonguing his way across the heaving chest and hooking his free hand under Naruto's thigh.

"Flail?! I do not - OH MY *GOD!*"

Naruto arched back as Kakashi raised off his heels with one smooth thrust to slide in that last inch, the blonde's free arm flailing at his side since he hadn't had a good grip on the Jounin's shoulder. Kakashi kept a tight hold on the rippling muscle under Naruto's thigh and held his other hand steady to brace Naruto's weight while he just rested his forehead against that warm skin. He took deep breaths and desperately tried not to let the sensations overwhelm him into releasing the pressure he'd been holding back for *so fucking long,* because, yeah, OH MY **GOD** was right, with that slick tight fluttering heat gripping him, *all of him,* seated and unable to get any closer, and *wanting* to get closer, wanting to slip into Naruto's skin and curl up next to his pounding heart.

Fingers grabbed his shoulder, nails digging in and making him lick his lips as he drank in that sweet god damn addictive scent. Moving his feet slightly to the sides, he eased back to sit between his heels so he could pull out about half way. Slowly. Naruto groaned, curling in as if trying to follow, trying to hold on, trying to get Kakashi back inside, until his arm was braced behind the Jounin's neck, head bowed near his shoulder, knees drawn up against his sides, ankles hooked firmly at the small of his back, and fingers white-knuckled laced in his.

"You can do whatever you want, Naruto," Kakashi whispered, brushing his lips along the curved neck as he traced his fingers over the blonde's hip and up his spine to rest his forearm against the warm sweaty back. "I'm not going anywhere. Not now," he continued quietly, kissing the rigid jaw and carefully shifting his weight to smoothly thrust up again at a slightly different angle.

"Not ever!" Naruto snarled, curling in tighter, locking his muscles, and grinding hard into Kakashi's pelvis with a choking shudder.

Kakashi winced at the frantic tension bearing somewhat painfully down on him. Too tight! The last thing in the world he wanted to do was hurt Naruto, and he sure as hell wasn't going

to just let him hurt himself.

"Well, that's going to make life very awkward for both of us," Kakashi murmured wryly, flicking his tongue at the edge of the blonde's ear and caressing his thumb over the rock-hard trembling back. "Especially when one of us needs to use the washroom."

"Fucking smartass," Naruto growled, unclenching his teeth and relaxing ever so slightly.

"Oh yeah, that's what I like to hear," he leered, stroking his other thumb over Naruto's knuckle and nibbling tenderly on his ear. "Come on, tell me more."

...smile for me...

"Lying, perverted, lazy bastard..." Naruto snerked, his words trailing off as he loosened his crushing grip on the Jounin's hand.

"Aw, baby, you know how to whisper sweet nothings like nobody else," he cooed, drawing small circles on the blonde's back with a lazy fingertip.

...you're so beautiful when you smile...

Naruto broke into an exasperated laugh, releasing the last of the desperate tension and lifting his head. "Shut up and kiss me!"

Kakashi caught Naruto's lips without missing a beat, ravishing that smiling mouth with an eagerness that demanded reciprocation. He eased his hips down as the hunger flared between them both, rocking back up as fingers twisted and pulled gently at his hair, sparring with that unbelievably talented tongue as he remained achingly slow with his rhythm. He clutched Naruto's arching back to keep as much skin slipping and pressing against his body as possible, the hard length of the blonde skating across his abs and leaving a sticky slick warm trail.

The sun beat down on him and a slight breeze sent goose bumps across his skin. He could feel the sweat roll like the ghosting touch of seductive thoughts trailing down every inch of his flesh, tasting it at the corners of his mouth and breathing in the sharp smell of it as it mingled with the sweeter taste and scent that was essentially Naruto. He kept his movements steady, shifting and tilting his hips to find the angle he needed, his partner needed, *his,* ***his!***

A trembling cry called across his tongue, muscle quivering beneath his fingers, clouding his brain as his body repeated the same exact movement, getting a louder response, shivering in his blood, remembering, repeating, that fabulous voice begging down his throat as he swallowed the delicious sound. Fingers were grasping clumsily at his hair, strong legs and slippery heat enveloping him, tightening magnificently and gliding in to meet him. The fabric of time blurred in that slow rhythm, the rest of the world dropping out of existence, because holy shit Naruto was popping his hips and *riding him,* flashing his teeth like a predator enjoying a meal, and baring his throat like prey waiting to be eaten.

Kakashi scratched his nails down the lean back and devoured that exposed throat, dragging enticingly louder sounds out of the blonde. The flames licked at his skin, tingling and

writhing. It was building into a mindless storm, the intensity of which he'd never experienced before. He'd never felt so free and so completely trapped, terrified and happy. Just...*happy,* elated and euphoric, drowning in the warmth and heat of that radiant life, breathing it in and feeling himself *being* breathed in.

Blinded as he was Kakashi could see so brightly it hurt, and he watched in rapt fascination as the sublime creature in his arms started to come apart at the seams, pulling him along. An overwhelming surge of possessiveness hit him seeing Naruto wracked with ecstasy, helpless and vulnerable, and he matched the gripping clinging enveloping tangled limbs and fingers with an almost crushing strength. He needed to protect him, hold him, answer that call, get deeper inside him, let him know he was there, keep him safe in his arms forever, and never let go!

Muscle clenched around him everywhere, inside and out, and he couldn't hold the pressure back anymore. It was like his soul was being grabbed, and he released a piece of it willingly to the one who cried out his name, echoing the call in a whisper and letting Naruto's name roll off his tongue as the universe cracked open in a glimmer of crystal clarity. It all sharpened to an almost agonizing degree; sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought. He wished he could live forever or die right then and there, carrying that moment of absolute perfection as his final memory.

He floated back to himself, gasping for air, his heart hammering against his ribs and his body melting into a somewhat boneless state as he got deliriously drunk off the scent and feel of the one sagging and limp against him and, fuck, slipping down his lap as his feet flopped to the floor. Catching Naruto around the waist with what little strength his arm still had, he kept that heaving chest pressed against his as he turned to slouch back against the bed, knees drawn up to cradle him and keep the blonde draped over him.

"I...I think that's...about all...from me for...awhile..." Naruto rasped, his breath hot and quick against the side of the Jounin's damp neck, and his words a bit clumsy from the wide smile that threatened to split his face.

"Yeah...me too," Kakashi replied around what felt like the most ridiculous grin curling at the corners of his mouth, blinking the haze out of his mind as every inch of his skin tingled back to reality for a few minutes. Lifting the hand holding Naruto's to his lips, he kissed each finger before freeing his own and kissing the blonde's palm. "How do you feel?"

"What," Naruto mumbled groggily.

"I said 'How do you feel?'," Kakashi repeated with a chuckle, slinging Naruto's noodley arm over his shoulder so he could fumble to reach for the tattered shirt/rag.

"I know. I was correcting you. The question should be 'What do you feel?', and the answer is: ...give me a minute."

"Can't feel your legs?" He asked, folding the cloth with one hand so he was working with clean material as he gently wiped the mess off the front of them both.

"We have a winner."

Kakashi smoothed the heel of his palm up and down Naruto's spine a few times, then slipped his fingers through the soft blonde hair and rested his cheek on the damp locks for a moment. Folding the rag in half again with his other hand, he set it down and tickled the bottom of Naruto's foot.

"What are you doing?! Stop that!" Naruto snickered, jerking his foot away clumsily and shifting to the side so his cheek was resting in the hollow of the Jounin's shoulder with his chin tilted up to face the man.

"Ah, looks like you can feel something," Kakashi hummed, ruffling the blonde hair.

"Goofy maniac."

"How's your back?"

"Tired."

"How're your hips?" Kakashi asked, trying a slightly more direct tactic while still remaining polite about continuing to try to get an answer to a rather delicate question.

"Tired," Naruto replied, an impish smile pulling at his lips.

"You're actually going to make me say it, aren't you..." Kakashi said flatly.

"Say what?" Naruto asked, his voice dripping with false innocence.

"Okay, fine, how's your ass?"

"Squishy," Naruto said, flashing a toothy grin as he wrinkled his nose impertinently.

"That's...not what..." Shaking his head, Kakashi dissolved into helpless laughter. "You nasty punk!"

"I'm just answering the question," Naruto said with wicked glee.

He was irresistible. Completely and utterly irresistible! Wrapping his arms around the foul-mouthed treasure, Kakashi buried his face in the blonde hair and laughed till it hurt. The pain in his chest came sharp and unexpected, shadows hissing in his ear and reminding him why he'd been asking questions in the first place. He found himself choking on air, trying to rein it all back in as he clutched Naruto for a few seconds while he caught his breath.

"All right, seriously, are you hurting anywhere?" Kakashi asked, blinking back the startling wild tangle of emotions.

"Mmm...nope!" He responded brightly after a subtle wriggle to check everything.

"Good, then let's get you and your squishy ass cleaned up."

Hooking his hands beneath Naruto's thighs to heave him up off his lap, Kakashi ducked his head under the arm slung loose around the front of his neck. Before Naruto could get his legs

under him, the Jounin had his shoulder nestled in the lean stomach and was pushing himself to his feet. The weight flopped over his shoulder and bumped against his back with a shout of protest, but Kakashi ignored it with a pleasant amiable hum as he carried Naruto to the washroom.

"My legs do work, you know!" Naruto snapped, bracing himself up on the small of Kakashi's back and trying to kick the aforementioned legs free of the man's grasp.

"Yes, I can see that," Kakashi said nonchalantly, keeping a tight hold on the squirming limbs with one arm and skittering his fingertips up the backs of Naruto's calves and thighs with his free hand.

"St-stop that!" He laughed, his hands slipping and his toes wiggling as he dropped back down.

There was an abrupt stinging slap on Kakashi's left butt cheek, and he almost ran into the doorframe leading to the washroom as he jumped with a bark of pain. Then there were hands grabbing him and squeezing the firm muscles the way a person checks fruit at the market, and he whipped a wide-eyed bewildered look over his shoulder.

"Holy shit, I bet you could bounce a kunai off your ass!"

"And aim it back with deadly accuracy," Kakashi smirked dryly, shaking his head and summoning a clone to clean up the mess in the apartment before he closed the washroom door and turned on only the hot water of the shower.

"Yeah, but can you *catch* one?" Naruto asked, the grin obvious in his voice as he drummed his fingers along the curve.

"Maybe," Kakashi said slyly, hooking his foot under the squat stool setting against the wall outside the shower. He balanced it carefully so the large ceramic bowl resting on top of it wouldn't fall, placing it under the scorching water near the wall as the small room got pleasantly steamy and warm.

"Hey, can I ask you a personal question?"

"You're molesting my ass and asking permission to get personal...?" He lifted an eyebrow, turning off the water as he sank down to his knees. He moved the half-filled bowl to the floor before sliding Naruto off his shoulder and onto the wooden stool.

"Cute," Naruto retorted sardonically, keeping his arms draped loosely around the Jounin's neck as he settled onto the seat. His expression shifted to a scowl of hesitation. "How many guys have you been with?"

"Two," Kakashi replied, dumping the water out of the bowl and turning on the lower faucet below the taps for the shower to fill it.

"Really? Who was the other one?" He asked in surprise.

"You," Kakashi said, pouring the warm water over Naruto's head and down his back.

"Who was the first guy!" Naruto persisted, twisting a lock of silver hair around his finger in agitation.

"Me," Kakashi flicked the end of Naruto's nose with an amused smile, then plucked his shampoo off the narrow shelf inset in the tile wall.

"You are such a jerk," Naruto snerked.

"Yeah," Kakashi said with a quiet sigh, rubbing the gel between his hands. Slipping his fingers through the wet blonde hair, he hooked the blindfold and pulled it down so it was looped around the blonde's neck. "I am."

"But you've got a mushy center in there somewhere," Naruto smiled tenderly without opening his eyes, sliding one hand down to rest his fingertips on the center of the Jounin's chest.

It felt like the spot beneath Naruto's fingers was caving in, echoing hollowly and hurting enough to force him to look away from that smile while he collected himself.

"They're called 'internal organs'," he drawled, massaging Naruto's scalp into a lathery foam.

The only response Kakashi got was a mumbled noise of pleasure as Naruto's shoulders dropped and he leaned into the caressing fingers. The soapy blonde head eventually made its way to the hollow of the Jounin's shoulder, and he toyed with the idea of putting the young man to sleep as he kneaded the back of the loose neck with one hand. It would be so easy to work his fingers across that tired body until he was a gelatinous heap that probably wouldn't wake up till morning...till the moment he would leave.

Filling the ceramic basin again, he poured the warm water over the head at his shoulder to rinse the suds away. A jolt of disappointment hit him as he noticed the mark he'd made on one side of Naruto's neck was already beginning to fade, and he traced the dark circle with his thumb. The disappointment twisted into an irrational and painful stab of possessiveness. Someone else could scar that tanned skin for life, and he couldn't leave a hickey for a day.

Then everything jumbled into an uncomfortable sense of relief, because if those marks did remain visible for all the world to see there would be eventual questions, and demands, and pitchforks, and torches, and a select number of the Hyuuga Clan that were going to Gentle Fist his ass into impotence, and a Hokage that was going to rip his balls off if a certain pink-haired kunoichi didn't get there first, after which Iruka would finish the job by turning him into a eunuch. Yep, life as a missing nin was looking pretty good right about now...and he wished the young man leaning against him didn't look infinitely better.

"You still awake?" He asked softly, grabbing his washcloth and soap to start massaging his way across Naruto's shoulders and back.

Naruto made a noise of affirmation in the back of his throat that sounded more like a purr than anything. Horrific future be damned, it was so worth it just to hear that sound. Besides, if he thought about it logically all he really needed were his hands. When he slipped his fingers around to wash the front of him, the blonde reluctantly eased back and pulled his

blindfold back up. Kakashi cringed at a surge of guilt and reached up to stop him, hooking his soapy finger at the side of the cloth.

"You don't have to put that back on," Kakashi said, feeling the dread twisting under the words.

"I know," Naruto replied affably, unhooking the Jounin's finger and adjusting the wet cloth over his eyes before fumbling to find the bowl next to him so he could fill it. "But I don't need to have my eyes open to see you." That tender smile graced his lips again as he carefully poured the warm water over Kakashi's head and shoulders, leading the path of it with his fingers. "It feels like I've been watching you forever without looking at you. And when I finally looked at you, you always kept your eyes closed."

Naruto set the bowl down and reached out to trace the arch of a silver eyebrow, his fingertip following the scar over Kakashi's eye from top to bottom almost lovingly. Why did he have to be such an exquisite nightmare, pulling out the knife and licking the wound till it burned with an agony the Jounin didn't want to ever stop.

"So, now we both have our eyes closed, and I can actually see you." Naruto cocked his head as his smile widened into an impish grin. "Besides, it's kinda kinky and fun being blindfolded while I have my way with you," he said, plucking the bar of soap from the washcloth in Kakashi's hand so he could begin washing the man's shoulders.

"...while *you* have *your* way with *me*..." Kakashi said with droll amusement, trying to shake off the aching pang that continued to linger in the center of his chest as he swept the soapy washcloth over the blonde's hip. "I seem to recall it being the other way around."

"Mm-hmm," he smirked, leaning in and caressing Kakashi's lips with his own, sliding his hands and arms down the rangy back.

There was no helping it, really, getting all tangled up in those tan limbs slippery and foamy with soap as he took languid tastes of that sweet mouth. A dim echo of hunger sent hands exploring through the bubbles and occasionally pouring water with gentle lazy curiosity, just wanting to map out all that skin and feel the muscle and bone. Warm but not hot, treading the line between desire and something softer while those nimble fingers sought out every inch of him the same way he was seeking with his own hands.

It was nature's inevitable call that had him smothering Naruto with a dry towel and shoving him out of the washroom so he could relieve his bladder. When he stepped back into the apartment, he had the blurred impression of a swift peck on the cheek and a body darting by before the door closed behind him. Chuckling, he shook a good amount of the water out of his hair and pulled on a pair of the dark slacks his clone had left on the bed. The other pair was already gone.

Kakashi had only just reached the cold remnants of tea in the pot on his range when Naruto opened the washroom door. The cuffs of the dark slacks were rolled above his ankles, and the towel was slung around his neck. The young man paused for a thoughtful second, then made his way unerringly toward the Jounin to wrap his arms around his waist and lean against his

back. Kakashi continued what he was doing with a slight smile, grabbing two cups, a few tangerines, and an apple from his cupboard.

"Tell me you have food," Naruto groaned, raising up on his toes to rest his chin on the taller man's shoulder.

Kakashi already had the apple lifted up to his shoulder, and bent his wrist a bit to bump the fruit against Naruto's nose as he drained a cup of tea so he could fill it again and empty the pot. There was a happy little noise from the blonde, the sound of teeth crunching into the apple before it was pulled out of Kakashi's hand, and one arm left his waist as the weight against his back shifted to a more angled position. Some unintelligible grumbling around a mouthful of food was followed by a judicious scrubbing of the towel at his wet hair.

"You need more than one towel," Naruto said, slinging the damp cloth behind Kakashi's neck as the Jounin crouched down to open his small refrigerator.

"I do have more than one towel," he replied dryly, pulling out the plastic-wrapped onigiri he'd made that morning. "The other one happens to be dirty. Here, hold this," he said, standing up to bundle the tangerines and onigiri in the towel before pressing it into Naruto's arms.

Kakashi picked up the tea cups and nudged the blonde with his elbow to guide him toward the middle of the room. He'd meant for them to sit on the floor to eat, but Naruto kept walking till his knee bumped the bed and he sat down on the edge of the mattress. Awkwardness settled over the Jounin as he stood there for a moment. He was already somewhat socially inept, but post-coital casual conversation was something he had never been faced with. It hadn't gotten seriously uncomfortable yet because, well, being naked in a shower was distracting, but now they were dressed and he had no idea what to even talk about.

"Did you grab something for yourself to eat, too?" Naruto asked, unfolding the white cloth over his lap and trying to hide his grin by focusing on unwrapping the onigiri.

"It's going to be hard choking down that rice without something to wash the taste of my foot out of your mouth," Kakashi said flatly, sinking down onto the mattress and shaking his head at how easily Naruto could shrug off and dispel an awkward air. He was so comfortable to be around it was truly frightening.

"Ouch," he snickered, biting down on the end of one of the onigiri to clamp it between his teeth while he held out the other for the Jounin to take, alongside an empty and expectant hand.

Kakashi eyed the outstretched hands for a few seconds. Canting his head thoughtfully, he placed one of the cups in the empty hand, quickly replaced the offered rice ball with the other cup, and then leaned in to take a bite from the one Naruto held in his teeth. There was an immediate noise of angry protest and surprise from behind the rice, which he studiously ignored as he ate his way around the onigiri. Naruto stamped his foot on the floor, his muffled protest getting mingled with laughter as he tried to lean back.

"Careful, you'll spill the tea," Kakashi said nonchalantly as he took another delicate bite of the rice. Naruto made a grumbling sound that hinted at a great number of terrible threats he would be delighted to inflict on the Jounin. "Mmm? What was that?" He asked, working his way around to the other side of the young man's mouth and flicking his tongue out to catch a few grains of rice stuck to the whisker-marked cheek. "You aren't as hungry as you thought you were? That's a shame," Kakashi sighed, slipping the food-laden towel off Naruto's lap with his free hand.

The veritable squeal of wordless indignation that came from Naruto was enough to make Kakashi pause to stifle a laugh as he set the bundle of fruit aside. It didn't stop him from continuing to nibble his way down the onigiri, however. Curious as to how close Naruto would let him get before he tried to retaliate for the teasing, Kakashi was surprised when the last bite was relinquished to him without incident as their lips met.

"You heartless ass, you are so dead," Naruto grinned, swallowing the bit of rice he'd already had clamped in his teeth. "If I don't get food, I'm going to eat *you!"*

"Aren't you the sassy little flirt today," Kakashi said, shifting on the bed and setting his feet on the blanket so he was facing the blonde.

Breaking off a piece of the second onigiri, he held it just out of reach of Naruto's mouth. A distance he maintained with devilish amusement as the young man leaned farther and farther forward to try to get his teeth into the rice. The Jounin simply eased lazily back, luring Naruto into squirming on his elbows and knees to creep himself toward the food.

"Will you just...you are such a bastard...give me the...I'm *hungry,* damn it!" Naruto railed, finally flopping onto Kakashi's stomach in frustrated humor with his chin resting on the Jounin's diaphragm. "If you wanted me in your lap again, you could have just asked."

"Where's the fun in that?" Kakashi chuckled, popping the rice into Naruto's mouth and resting his legs at the sides of the blonde's narrow hips as he settled onto the mattress.

The late afternoon sun made everything a languid burnt sienna as the light crept across the bed, and he was a little surprised at how deeply comfortable all that warmth spilling and draped over him felt. He found himself wishing the sun wouldn't go down, that the world would simply stay motionless in that light and keep the shadows of night at bay. Tomorrow it would be over and Naruto would be gone, and he really didn't want to confront the notion that forever only lasted a day quite yet.

"Your idea of 'fun' always seems to come at my expense," Naruto replied dryly, lifting his chin to take a drink of tea. "You really like making me mad, don't you."

"You said it yourself, I am a jerk," Kakashi replied, slipping another bite of rice into Naruto's open mouth before folding a pillow under his neck and shoulders.

"Mmm..." Naruto hummed thoughtfully, swallowing the food and sinking his teeth into the Jounin's stomach.

"Ow!"

"But I like you that way," Naruto snickered, propping his chin next to the bite mark he'd put on Kakashi's skin.

The rippling of Naruto's abs against his groin zinged up his spine and pooled in his gut. He drew one knee up to shift the young man's weight to the side a bit, the warmth soaking into him starting to raise in temperature.

"Glad to hear it," he drawled sardonically, cramming the rest of the onigiri into Naruto's mouth and plucking his cup of tea from the blonde's hand while he struggled not to choke around the mouthful of food.

"You also seem to like shoving shit into my mouth," Naruto grumbled, chewing on the rice and washing it down with his tea as he settled his weight more on Kakashi's thigh and hip.

"It's kind of hard to resist since it's always open," Kakashi said, draining his own tea and setting both his and Naruto's empty cups on the bedside table before picking up a tangerine to break it in half.

"It isn't alway-mff! Stop doing that!" Naruto scowled after wrenching the tangerine half out of his mouth.

"Can't help it, it's a survival instinct."

"What?!"

"You tried to take a bite out of me, I was in fear for my life," Kakashi said innocently, chewing on a wedge of citrus.

"What can I say?" He laughed, resting his forearms on the taller man's chest as he peeled a few pieces of tangerine free. "You bring out the cannibal in me."

Kakashi had to close his eyes for a moment and clench his teeth. The vibrating of the laughter against his inner thigh and hip was awakening him faster than he could suppress it, and he had to fight the urge to draw up his other knee so he could get Naruto shifted back over his groin. The little drips of citrus juice falling onto his chest like sugary afterthoughts of kisses weren't helping either.

"Considering what you feed yourself, I'm not surprised your instincts are driving you to seek out a better source of nutrition," Kakashi sighed, rubbing his tacky fingers over his forehead before focusing on peeling the rest of his tangerine.

"You haven't tasted my cooking in almost two months! I have improved dramatically, I'll have you know," Naruto sniffed and continued leaving a sticky trail as he blindly peeled and ate his fruit.

"The basis of reality would implode if you got any worse," he said wryly, setting the peels on the towel and trying not to think about the buzzing under his skin.

"Hey!"

"Well, except for your rice."

"I do make better rice than you, don't I," Naruto grinned smugly, fumbling to find the towel and set his own peels aside.

"I concede defeat there. You have indeed surpassed me," Kakashi chuckled, breaking another tangerine in half to occupy his itching fingers.

"I'm also getting better at remembering to clean up my dishes," Naruto said slyly.

Kakashi arched an eyebrow at that, then swallowed a groan as the blonde started sliding his tongue up the sticky citrus trail. Something else slid across his fingers and down his arms to drip off his elbows, and he silently cursed as he flung the crushed tangerine halves onto the towel. The idea of grabbing the towel and wiping his hands and arms off was fleeting, outvoted by the need for friction against the aching hardness between his legs and the need to get his hands on that warm skin right the fuck now! He bent his knee and dug his tacky fingers into Naruto's back as that lean body slithered across him and licked his way up his throat and chin.

"If you wanted to kiss me, you could have just asked," Kakashi said, catching a taste of Naruto's mouth as the blonde settled his own stiff length against the taller man's.

"Where's the fun in that?" He smirked, silencing the Jounin's laugh with an impatient tongue and rolling his hips to grind into his crotch.

Naruto's pace started slow, but as their kissing heated up - and Kakashi figured out that pushing his thumbs down the blonde's spine as far as he could reach and then dragging his nails back up the toned muscle made Naruto shiver and arch into the touch like a cat - his movements steadily became faster and more insistent with a rising frantic need. Kakashi's mind began clouding over, wanting nothing more than to keep that body right where it was as he flexed his back and pressed into that need with his own.

With a choked cry, Naruto abruptly pulled away and sat back on his heels with his head dropped on Kakashi's stomach. Naruto's breath was hot against his skin as the young man panted heavily and dug the heel of his palm into the inside of his own thigh. Blinking the fog out of his head, the Jounin slipped his fingers through the soft blonde hair as every square inch of him screeched and wailed at the loss of contact, demanding he do something to *get that fucking body back on top of him!*

Seconds passed like hours while he tried to ignore the clawing in his blood, biting his lip to keep himself from telling Naruto that it really was okay if he spent himself right then. Resisting the urge to grab him and drag him back so he could feel him writhe between his legs and taste the warmth and smell the tangy citrusy sweat and hear him calling out RIGHT THAT FUCKING SECOND, GOD DAMN IT!

Then, as suddenly as everything had stopped, it started again with renewed vigor and ferocious speed. His slacks were yanked down over his knees and he was plunged into hot, wet, undulating-

"Teeth!" Kakashi hissed, jolting up on his elbows and wincing at the light scraping on skin far too sensitive.

There was a muffled reply that vibrated and pulsed around half the length of him, and he clutched at the blanket beneath him as his hips twitched up and his whole body trembled at the overwhelming sensation.

"Don't...don't talk," he gasped, willing his hips back down instead of bucking up into the sliding and gripping that was rhythmically making its way farther down, making him lose his mind.

A staccato burst of amusement quaked and swallowed against him, and it took everything he had to halt his thrust mid-way as he threw his head back and choked out a moan.

"Stop...talking!" He grated through clenched teeth, trying to keep his focus, trying to keep control, trying not to sink into the ecstasy of being helpless and lost, trying not to look down because watching would send him over the edge.

Fingers gingerly cupped and caressed and rolled his sack, and he just wanted them to keep going, keep searching, because his body was on god damn fire! He wanted to let go so fucking bad, because he couldn't stop his hips from tilting up into the mouth that wouldn't quit trying to gulp down more of him, and wouldn't...quit...fuck! *Wouldn't quit humming!* Quivering against him and wrapping his tongue around him, blinding him to everything but the thought of surrender.

He tried not to think about how much he wanted to give in to the pressure building and scorching at his nerves, tingling across his skin and screaming at him to relinquish control. He tried not to think about the need snarling and shrieking up his spine, cracking his resistance and shredding his sanity with how much he wanted...just wanted...want, *want,* ***want, FUCKING NEEDED!*** *Needed him closer before the day ended and it was all over! Needed to slice himself open from throat to navel and lay himself bare without hiding behind walls* ***for just once in his fucking life!***

Lips hit the base of his cock, and for a brief moment he stared wide-eyed at his ceiling, balanced precariously on a threshold. He couldn't breathe, caught between giving in to a release that would drain the last of his strength and suppress the madness, or holding back so he could fall into the unknown and let the snare cinch tight around his neck. He looked down at the blonde head between his legs, letting his gaze follow farther down to the reason Naruto would not stop humming and moaning. He almost lost it right then and there, because the blonde was getting himself off giving *him* a fucking blow job!

Kakashi fought back the pressure of release and sat up, feeling the wire settle around his neck. He slipped his hands beneath the young man's shoulders and firmly lifted him up, his heart pounding as he felt the blade rest against his chest. He silenced the questioning protest with a voracious kiss that tasted like salty tangerines, apples and tea, pulling back as the snare around his throat began to constrict. He slid his fingers through the soft hair and smoothed his thumbs along Naruto's cheekbones, choking in air at the first shallow cut of the blade.

"Smile for me," Kakashi whispered.

"What?" Naruto laughed, looping his arms around the taller man's neck.

The sunlight sizzled over the wounds and wire, and he attacked that smiling mouth like a starving man as the walls crumbled. He let himself fall. Fall back into the pillow, into the cold shadows of the unknown as he clutched and held onto the warmth, drinking it in as it raced over his skin and wondering if this would be the last time he'd ever feel it. There was a tangled struggle to get clothes completely off without breaking their ravenous kissing. The fear slashed at his chest, and he languished in it as he whipped the blindfold off Naruto and threw it across the room.

He caught a glimpse of wide startled blue eyes, and he grinned like a wolf as the snare cinched tight, cutting into his windpipe. He fumbled blindly for his bedside table drawer because he didn't want to leave those lips, didn't want to stop tasting the curve in that neck, didn't want to stop drowning in the smell of him. Finally getting what he was after, he set it on the bed so he could slip his fingers through the soft blonde hair one more time. Naruto's fingers untwined themselves from his hair, ghosting over his neck and jaw as he pushed himself up on his elbows and tried to climb over the Jounin's legs.

Kakashi pinned the narrow hips tight between his bent knees, reveling in the dread that cut and twisted into his stomach with an almost hysteric delight because those eyes that could break him so easily were looking at him now. Sky blue was hazed with desire, flashing with impatience and devouring the sight of a face he'd never seen before. It was like his skin was being peeled off as fingertips gently brushed his cheek, and he licked his lips at the pain gnashing behind his lungs.

"Unimpressive, isn't it," Kakashi rasped with a sardonic smile.

"You have a crooked smile. It goes with your crooked hair, I like it," Naruto grinned, his expression bright with avaricious glee as he reached an arm down to push against the Jounin's knee, trying to get loose.

Kakashi barked out a laugh that tore pleasantly through his ribs, and he snatched Naruto's wrist off his knee to place the hand over the bottle on the mattress, sliding his fingers over backs of the blonde's knuckles.

"What would you do if I said you weren't the only one spending too much damn time in the shower every morning?" He asked, feeling the sweat roll off his skin like blood.

Naruto blinked in confusion before his eyes widened in comprehension and he looked down, his frame tensing.

"You're disappointed," Kakashi chuckled, relief shattering through him like ice as it crawled across that glorious pain to make it ugly.

"I..." "Well, don't worry about it," he said, relaxing the grip he had around Naruto's waist and dropping one leg to the mattress while the shadows cackled behind his ears. "It was just a jo-"

"I'm nervous," Naruto mumbled, gripping the bottle and hunching his shoulders.

"You're what...?" Kakashi blinked, caught off guard by a phrase he couldn't ever remember hearing come out of the blonde.

"I'm nervous, okay?!" Naruto said defiantly, lifting his gaze as his face flushed red. "And...well...*really* surprised, but mostly just... Damn it, stop laughing at me! What the hell were you expecting blind-siding me like that?!"

"I don't know," Kakashi gasped in mirth, the fangs of panic plucking a lovely melody across the wire around his throat and scorching his relief away. "When people get disenchanted there's really no telling what will happen."

"You're crazy, you know that?" Naruto scowled.

"Yeah, I do," Kakashi grinned, pulling the blonde down so he could get a taste of the beautiful nightmare that chased the shadows back.

He danced his fingers over Naruto's chest and back to find all those tender spots that drove the young man wild. It was so easy to distract him by sparring with his tongue, to get him all wound up like a spring and make him forget he was ever nervous in the first place. To get him leaning in and grinding against him, shivering and panting, skating his teeth down the Jounin's throat and licking the sweat at his jugular. To get him fanning the flames that ripped through his veins.

The first finger was hesitant, and Kakashi had to scratch his nails up Naruto's back to get him to slide it all the way in so he could arch back into the pressure. It swiftly turned into a chaos of jangling nerves and electricity with lips, tongue and teeth working across one side of his chest while fingers mapped, explored, scratched and caressed the other. Finding the places that had him trembling, jumping and trying to claw his way out of his own skin to get more, to feel more!

The burning ache of need threaded down his spine as the pressure intensified and over stimulated him with a rhythm that came so close to matching his racing heartbeat. He slid across a washboard stomach that provided just enough friction to keep him from going over the edge. It was getting hard to focus on anything but the want and need, digging his heels into the mattress so he could rock his hips and get more of that warm body against him, inside him, the ice in his bones starting to crack and pop.

And then the warmth abruptly left him, pulled out, moved back, taken away and left him grasping desperately at a few strands of hair while he tried to remember how to breathe. He blinked at the ceiling and gulped in air, shuddering at the cold lack of weight, skin, lips, hands, everything!

"I don't know how much to use," Naruto said, the worry clear in his tone.

"Did you overdo it?" Kakashi asked, his voice sounding distant against the backdrop of the howling in his blood.

"Um, maybe a little?"

"Then it's enough," Kakashi said.

When there was no reply, he shifted his gaze to the blonde's face. Naruto didn't look convinced, and the concern darkening his expression was unbearably painful to watch. Lifting his shoulders to get his hands behind Naruto's head, Kakashi pulled him in with a strained chuckle.

"Come here, you're always making me repeat myself," he said, tucking the soft yellow hair under his chin and wrapping his arms around Naruto's frame to ease some of the ache. "You can do whatever you want, Naruto."

"I don't want to hurt you," Naruto replied quietly, one hand tightly gripping the Jounin's bicep.

"You won't," Kakashi said, swallowing the screams of his nerves and smoothing his thumbs over the damp skin. "You don't have to do this."

"What would you do if I said I want to do this so much it's scaring me?"

"I'd ask you why you're taking so god damn long to fuck me into the mattress."

"You have a nasty mouth when you get flustered," Naruto snerked, squirming to prop himself up on one hand so he could stick his tongue in the aforementioned mouth.

Slick fingers traced the head of his cock and he bucked up into the slippery grasp, scratching his nails up Naruto's back in frustration as the shorter blonde had to let go and scoot back. The sun was still bleeding through the window, liquefying everything. It was still warm, there was still time to burn in the daylight, exposed and unhinged with his heart pounding outside his ribs. He never took his eye off Naruto's face, shivering as he watched him bite his lip while he pressed against him tentatively.

There was a careful ease of pressure, and he did his best to relax into the almost uncomfortable sensation of stretching, filling, *feeling,* just being unbelievably hyper-aware of nerve endings that twitched and rattled at the stimulation. Naruto squeezed one eye shut and hunched to a stop, gasping as his skin flushed. Kakashi was caught in fascination once more, brushing his fingertips over Naruto's cheek at the sight of the young man dancing the edge of so much pleasure it nearly hurt.

Those blue eyes swallowed him up, hungry and soft, searching, questioning, demanding, begging, burning, possessive...afraid... Kakashi lifted his heels off the bed and rested his calves at Naruto's hips, silently urging him on because he *wanted* him closer, reassuring him with a caress on his cheek because he *needed* him closer, and smiling as the fires turned the fear to ash because whatever question had been worrying him had somehow been answered or forgotten.

Naruto's rhythm was halting and slow, a distinct contrast to the sharp carnal flash in his eyes. It was such a deliciously selfish and prideful sight, knowing he was the cause of that sublimely tortured expression of pleasure and lust. Kakashi could feel him trembling with the effort to maintain control, to defy the predatory thirst in the Jounin's gaze because Kakashi

didn't give a shit about slow and careful as long as he could see the fires glowing beneath Naruto's skin. He didn't care how Naruto got there as long as he could feel the flames on the inside, filling him up and shattering the ice in his bones.

He couldn't help but grin when those slick fingers again wrapped around his stiff twitching length, because he could feel Naruto's pelvis pressing against him as far as his hips would allow and he knew the blonde had quite literally been holding himself back. He had to curl forward a bit to capture Naruto's mouth, but it was worth the effort as those nimble fingers gripped and stroked him into a fantastically insistent pace. His blood was boiling, but he needed more heat, more friction, more everything!

And then there was more, a deep sliding counterpoint to the swifter pace stroking him, and Kakashi felt himself arching back into it like his spine was trying to curve all the way down to his toes. There were teeth on his neck, a tongue at his throat, and he choked out a laugh as his brain couldn't keep up with his senses. His fingers felt clumsy and numb because he was being turned inside out at an infuriatingly gentle pace. He didn't want gentle! He wanted the thrusting to be as fast as the hand that was - *holy fuck, hit that spot again!*

Every inch of him quivered, fireworks going off down his backbone and sending sparks into his gut. He grasped at the rippling muscle of Naruto's back, rocking his hips to meet him, to try to get that angle back, to try to get him to speed the fuck up! The tenderness hurt worse than anything, aching deeper than Naruto could reach. He wanted to be blinded from it, distracted with a physical ache he could identify and deal with, something to twist it all into a single pain he could find release from.

Except Naruto didn't speed up, and he found that angle and kept it, caressing Kakashi on the inside and drawing that horrible ache up to the surface where the Jounin couldn't ignore it. It hurt so fucking much because everything felt so *god damn fucking **good!*** He never wanted it to end and he couldn't endure any more, because there was a warm pulsing in his bones and he had someone closer to him than he'd ever let anyone. Slipping into his skin and making all that cold emptiness crackle and steam because the walls were gone. Bathing in the sunlight and choking the breath out of him because Naruto was so terrifyingly beautiful.

The ache continued to smolder along his sternum and thrum in his ears, adding a sharper cadence to the firestorm building and lashing at his nerves. He could feel his mind fracturing as his body began to tremble and quake, unable to hold back against the painful ecstasy any longer. That ache followed him, burning off his resolve and melting the shackles at his voice because Naruto was his. ***HIS!*** Completely and unequivocally his!

He grabbed onto the blonde and pulled him that last little distance into his chest so he could feel the soft hair tickle his face. Drinking in the scent as he went over the edge, shouting his name as the world fell apart. His body seized up, jolting an electric current from his fingers to his toes that seemed to sweep the very life out of him in his release. For a brief moment he actually wondered if he was dead, because it felt like he was outside his own body experiencing the world trying to put itself back together in astonishing clarity.

Then it was like life was put back into him, melting him back into his own exhausted body as Naruto screamed his name. He felt warm and sticky, satisfied and strengthless, gasping for air and incomprehensibly content having that lean body weighted over him like a human-shaped

heating pad. Rolling his head to the side, he watched the last rays of sun glimmer through the window. It took a while, but as the skin not being covered started to twitch with the chill in the air he knew he needed to take a bit of action before he dropped off to sleep.

Fumbling for the towel, Kakashi folded it clumsily and tried to do some cleaning up. It wasn't easy with muscle and bone that felt like mush, but he managed somehow. Naruto was just lifeless, allowing himself to be shifted against the Jounin's side so Kakashi could ditch the towel and kick the blanket out from beneath them. Getting the blanket back up over them was a trial with an arm and leg draped over him, and a head settled very comfortably in the hollow of his shoulder. But, he persevered and finally sank into the mattress like it was quicksand.

"Hey, Kakashi?" Naruto mumbled.

"Mmm?" Kakashi responded just as wearily, not having the energy to open his eye.

"I almost forgot..."

"Forgot what?" He asked, cracking his eye open and trying to figure out how he was going to be able to muddle through a conversation when he couldn't think.

"Happy Birthday."

Kakashi's eye widened and his brain halted its sluggish process of attempting to rouse itself. It was his birthday? He'd stopped keeping track of that date over twenty years ago, and only celebrated it when someone else reminded him of the day and harangued him into going out for a few hours. Usually it was Gai, and he also usually subtracted a ridiculous number of years from the actual total of Kakashi's age.

That painful ache threatened to gnaw through his chest and keep him awake as a chill made him shiver. He shifted and pulled Naruto a little closer to share in the warmth, taking a deep breath and feeling himself start to fade back into the lethargy that awaited him. The sun had set and the shadows were stretching across the room, but if he closed his eye he could still smell the sunlight and grass drifting on the wind because he was holding them in his arms.

"Thank you," he whispered to the softly snoring young man. He didn't let himself think about how it was all going to disappear in the morning as he let sleep claim him, but he couldn't keep himself from wishing he would never wake up.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I can imagine there are a lot of people angry with me for one obvious reason. For a homosexual couple it's called being versatile, for a straight couple it's called pegging, and for those who think it's sick and wrong it's called discrimination. Try not to hate

people too much for wanting to share the pleasure they give their partner, because that's all it amounts to in the end. Not everyone does it, not everyone likes it, but as long as any kind of lovin' is loved by both lovers, to each their own. =)

So, for any readers who will be dropping this fic cold after this chapter, I want to thank you - honestly and truly - from the bottom of my heart for sticking with me this far. I still love you even if you hate me! *GROUP HUG*

But Who's the Hunter?

Kakashi was a light sleeper by nature, which was only intensified due to a lifetime of training and an occupation that necessitated a constant state of being on guard or risk dying. Deep sleep for him seldom coincided with the true definition of the term, his instincts simply didn't allow him that luxury. So, when the grey pre-dawn light prompted his brain into stirring from its rare truly deep slumber he found himself overwhelmed by a sense of complete disorientation because his semi-conscious mind and instincts were shouting conflicting messages that his reflexes were responding to before he even opened his eye.

It all happened in a second, and he was only vaguely aware of reacting to a frantic stream of information he perceived but didn't understand. Weight on his chest that shouldn't be there, don't move, *someone was in his apartment,* DON'T MOVE, something pinning his leg and arm, **PROTECT HIM**, *he was being held down,* ***GET AWAY FROM HIM NOW!*** He blinked owlishly in the dim light as his feet hit the floor, skidding across the room in a crouch with his fingers trailing over the wood.

His heart was hammering in his chest, his stomach was twisted in a panic so violent he had to swallow to keep from vomiting, and he had absolutely no idea why. He blinked again and wilted to his knees as his brain finally caught up to him, kicking him in the face with an overabundance of comprehension as he stared at the motionless figure on the bed. He pressed his palm into his sternum to try to calm his breathing, slow his heart, and keep his rebellious stomach from mounting an all-out assault.

Rubbing his face and thanking Naruto's parents for whichever side of the family passed down his ability to sleep like a rock, Kakashi lurched to his feet and picked up his discarded slacks as he walked to the washroom. He closed the door silently and leaned back against it in the dark for a few minutes until his nerves settled. The fabled 'morning after' had started dreadfully, and the total unfamiliarity of the entire situation made his skin twitch with the sensation of being too exposed. He'd broken down all his walls yesterday, and there was no putting them back up. Everything was laid bare, and he couldn't help the feeling of discomfort that came with it.

The fog that had been clouding so much of his rational thought had lifted, and he could recall every minute detail of the previous day through the all too clear lens of guilt. Switching on the light, he stepped into the shower. He kept the water just cold enough to be tolerable, snatching up the soap with a snort of self-disgust. Of all the stupid things he'd done yesterday, allowing himself to fall asleep like that with Naruto in his arms was close to the top of the list. And bloody hell, it was a long list!

He rested his forehead on the cool tile wall as he scratched the soap through his hair. He knew himself better than that, he should have...should have... Should have what?! Untangled himself from Naruto's limbs and pulled away so there was some space between them?! Slept on the god damn floor?! After everything that had happened, what kind of fucked up person would do that?! It had felt so good holding Naruto as he'd fallen asleep. Why couldn't that

have stayed?! Why couldn't he have just...just...*not been the person he always was when he woke up?!*

Books made it sound so easy to change overnight. Why couldn't that simply happen to him?! He'd held someone in his arms like that for the first time in his life, and he had to go and ruin it by being himself. He'd finally had an entire day of what he'd ached for and dreamt about for what felt like a thousand years, and the chill of raw fear that came with being accepted so unconditionally in that last moment was still strong enough to make him shiver under the cold water.

Scrubbing the goose bumps off his arms, he let his fingers brush the small bite mark on his stomach and viciously quashed the heat that began radiating from beneath it as he continued washing himself. It would have been so much easier if Naruto had rejected him somewhere along the way, drawing a line in the sand that Kakashi could step back from and deal with. But he'd driven himself to the brink knowing the answer would be 'yes', still half expecting it to be 'no' because that's what was *supposed* to happen.

Rejection was simple and routine. He'd been rejecting people, or manipulating them into rejecting him for as long as he could remember. Damn it! Why did Naruto have to look at him with eyes begging to be allowed to stay?! To be captured and held forever because he wanted and needed Kakashi with every scrap of his being. Glowing and burning with that greedy expression because Kakashi wanted and needed him so fucking bad it hurt.

He turned the shower off and stood there as the water trailed down the contours of his lean muscle, dripping off his chin and fingertips. The howling itch in his blood that he'd been trying to suppress for months was gone, sated beyond measure, but he didn't have the cool sweeping calm he was accustomed to feeling afterwords. Instead, it felt as if he had warm syrup in his veins despite the cold shower, underpinned with a thrumming growl frighteningly familiar enough to let him know it had been echoing in the background for quite some time.

He wasn't satisfied. He wanted more. More than just a taste. More than just a day. More than just a body trembling under his fingers. He wanted that smile turned toward him in a way no one else would ever see. A laughter in Naruto's voice that was his alone to hear. He wanted to hoard Naruto and hide him in his pocket, never letting him go until that bright scent was threaded in his clothes and clinging to his skin forever. Until he could smell himself in that blonde hair and know he was the only one allowed to touch him.

"You are one seriously creepy guy..." Kakashi said darkly, scratching most of the water from his hair.

He swiped as much of the moisture off his skin as he could before pulling on his trousers. The room was brighter when he stepped back into the apartment, but the sun hadn't risen yet and everything looked hazy and washed out in the dim pastel light. Naruto's snoring had turned up in volume, and he'd somehow managed to sprawl himself into an awkward looking position on the bed. The blanket was off his back and tangled around his feet and waist, one arm dangling off the edge of the bed and the other shoved under the pillow above his head.

Kakashi sighed as he picked up the dirty towel off the floor and dumped it into his hamper, suddenly a bit thankful he'd skittered out of bed early enough to avoid being mauled by the blonde's restless sleep. He grimaced and tried not to think of what might have happened if Naruto had been the one to wake him with his flailing. Sliding his dresser drawer open to take out a long-sleeved shirt, he had to admit he was more than a little astonished Naruto hadn't appeared to have even moved throughout the night. Granted, he was always more active right before he woke up, but unless he was sleeping propped against someone's back he still tended to roll and shift around a lot.

As if on cue, Naruto mumbled something about ramen and swimming pools, and then flopped onto his back. The pillow tumbled to the floor as he switched which arm now dangled off the mattress. Scooping up the fallen pillow along with the second pair of discarded trousers, Kakashi sat at the head of the bed and draped the slacks over his knee before setting the pillow on his lap. He slipped his shirt over his head, pausing for a moment as he reflexively adjusted the collar over the bridge of his nose. Gazing down at the fitfully sleeping blonde, he gave himself a rueful smile and pulled the mask down.

"How do you even sleep like that?" He murmured wryly, reaching out to carefully cradle his hand beneath Naruto's head so he could tuck the pillow back where it belonged. There really wasn't any need to wake him up just yet, he could sleep for a while longer.

Abruptly, Naruto shifted again, turning over and swinging his arm so it bumped numbly into Kakashi's leg. His fingers twitched, catching on the fabric of the Jounin's slacks, and his tangled feet kicked out as he shrugged his shoulders in to snuggle his head against the side of the man's thigh. Kakashi sat there for a minute, waiting for the next round of flailing. But it didn't come. All the restless tension had drained out of the young man, and his snoring had quieted down to the soft background noise even Kakashi could sleep through.

That now-familiar ache wound its way through his chest, and he hesitantly slid his fingers through the blonde hair. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that he had the heart of Konoha curled up next to him in a bed he'd spent his life never once even considering sharing with another person. It wasn't fair that he'd stolen it in a moment of unguarded passion, getting scorched in the backdraft till there was no hope of letting go. It wasn't fair that he didn't *want* to let go when he knew he had nothing but old shadows, emptiness, and a dwindling number of years to give back. It wasn't fair.

"Hey, Sensei?" Kakashi whispered to the quiet room, a sad smile pulling at his lips as he brushed his fingertips across Naruto's bangs. "Can I keep him? I promise I'll take him for walks and feed him every day."

The only answer was the rustling of the curtain as a chilly breeze drifted through the open window, and Kakashi stretched out his hand to tug the blanket over Naruto's shoulders. He had an hour before the spell was broken, before Naruto would have to wake up and leave. Logically, he knew he should wake him up so they could talk and attempt to begin to sort out the mess they were now in, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He couldn't let go of the last lingering peaceful fragments of forever yet, and he didn't want to stop sliding his fingers through that warm soft hair because he didn't know when he'd get the chance to do it again.

The clock eventually betrayed him well past the hour he'd originally given himself, and the sky had lightened to the clear blue of morning now that the sun was up. There was no helping it anymore. He'd already procrastinated long enough that Naruto was going to have to scramble to get to the Mission Assignment Desk at a reasonably late time. Letting the blonde strands fall off his fingers, he closed his eye and mentally readied himself as well as he could for the uncharted territory ahead. He wasn't looking forward to what he was going to have to say.

"Naruto, it's time to wake up," he said, giving the young man's shoulder a little shake.

"Nnmm...five more minutes..." Naruto mumbled, scrunching his body closer to Kakashi's leg.

"Come on, get up," Kakashi said firmly. "You're on duty today, and you're going to be late."

"You're late all the time, why do I have to be the one to watch the clock?" Naruto groaned, heaving himself to a sitting position and looking around with half-awake bleary confusion. "Why is Mr. Ukki the Second in my apartment?"

"He's not," Kakashi said with a touch of amusement, glancing over at the potted plant which had been re-named and re-gifted after Naruto managed to salvage a cutting of the poor mangled thing from the rubble of Pain's destruction of Konoha. "He's in *my* apartment."

"Oh," he said blankly, turning and blinking at Kakashi. His muzzy eyes stared at the taller man's face for a moment, and the Jounin arched an eyebrow as he watched the gears starting to turn. "Ooohh..." Naruto breathed, his eyes clearing and widening while a blush crept up his cheeks.

"Good morning," Kakashi smiled wryly, plucking the second pair of trousers off his leg. "Here, put these-" He grunted at the impact of Naruto damn near tackling him with a tight hug around his waist, quickly tensing his muscles so they both didn't tumble to the floor. "-on..."

"I have a better idea," Naruto grinned impishly from where he was half draped over the Jounin's lap. "Why don't you take yours off?"

"Not going to happen," Kakashi said flatly, resting his hand on the blonde's narrow waist and stolidly refusing to allow his own body to give in to the temptation of that warm skin. "You see that round thing up on the wall? I want you to look at it and count to ten."

Naruto gave him a perplexed scowl, and then looked over his shoulder at the clock.

"Shit! I'm going to be late!" He gasped, scrambling out from under the blanket and hurriedly stuffing a leg into the offered trousers before halting and then trying to kick them back off. "Shower!"

"Ah, you can't do that here," Kakashi said, hooking one of Naruto's arms as he attempted to bolt to the washroom while tripping on the slacks still caught around his ankle. "I don't have any towels left, and you don't have a change of clothes. You need to go back to your own place to wash up."

"Damn it!" Naruto grumbled, hiking the slacks up around his waist before crouching down to fix the rolled cuffs over his ankles. Kakashi stepped over to his dresser and picked up the blonde's folded clothes, holding the shirt out. "Why didn't you wake me sooner?!" He demanded, shoving the shirt over his head and snatching up the rest of the unwearables.

"I was busy."

"Doing what?!" He wailed in frustration, darting over to the entranceway to yank on his sandals.

"Thinking," Kakashi replied, the seriousness of his tone making Naruto stop and look up at where the Jounin stood on the step.

"Thinking about what?" Naruto asked with a touch of hesitation, all the frantic energy draining out of his frame as he straightened up. Kakashi's stomach clenched at the expression on Naruto's face, and he took a deep breath.

"A lot of things," Kakashi said, stepping down into the small entranceway so he didn't feel like he was towering over the shorter young man. "And now that I have your undivided attention, there's something we need to talk about before you leave."

"Can't we talk about it when I get back?"

"Oh, don't worry, we're going to do that, too," Kakashi said. "The problem is, I might not be here when you get back, and you might not be here when I get back. So, this needs to be said now, and I need you to *listen* to me." He paused for a heartbeat to let that get absorbed, trying to ignore the sinking in his insides. "Don't tell anyone what happened here."

"What? Why?!" Naruto bristled in startled confusion.

"Because you need to do some thinking, too," Kakashi replied firmly.

"About what?!"

"About *everything*, damn it!" He said forcefully, gripping Naruto's shoulders and glowering at the defiant blonde until he cooled down a notch. "That sure as hell wasn't anything that either of us just do on a regular basis."

"First time for me..." Naruto mumbled, glancing down as his cheeks flushed.

"Yeah, well, me too," Kakashi sighed, relaxing his hold. Naruto lifted an eyebrow in wry disbelief as he looked up. "You know what I mean," he said, rolling his eye. "At any rate, this is not something other people need to know about before we've figured it out ourselves. Yesterday was not supposed to happen-"

"Not supposed to happen?!" Naruto snarled, pulling away from the Jounin's hands and stepping back.

"Damn it, let me finish," he grated, feeling his own ire boiling a lot faster than normal.

"Are you trying to say it was all a *mistake?!"*

Kakashi looked dead into Naruto's eyes as he heard himself say 'Yes', icy little black tendrils winding their way under his skin and hissing in his ears. It felt as if the air was cracking like glass as the blonde's eyes widened and lost a great deal of their light. Rage swiftly blazed behind them again, but it was a dark shine and it felt like his sternum was splintering and driving inward as the shadows scratched at his wrists and ankles. He could take the fall and make it a clean break.

Or...

Kakashi lunged forward as Naruto opened his mouth to deliver some unfathomably venomous feedback to his reply, effectively preventing the verbal backlash by pinning Naruto to the wall and devouring those parted lips with a fierce hunger that startled himself. "And it was the best mistake I've ever made, you impatient hot-tempered idiot," he said, breaking the kiss before Naruto's fervent response carried things too far.

...he could finish his fucking sentence.

"You need to stop interrupting me, it's a very rude habit," Kakashi sighed, resting his forehead against Naruto's and putting his palms on the wall.

"Shut up!" Naruto snapped and bit his lip, blinking furiously as he clutched the front of the Jounin's dark shirt with subtly trembling hands.

"Naruto, you don't know anything about me," Kakashi said softly, an apologetic smile pulling at his lips.

"I know enough," he said with stubborn conviction as he tightened his hold on Kakashi's shirt.

"No...you don't..."

"Then start talking!"

"I don't like talking about myself, and there's no time to even start."

"I'll send a shadow clone to the Mission Assignment Desk," Naruto persisted, jerking lightly on the fabric in his hands.

"You know that won't work."

"I'll call in sick."

"I'd rather not have Sakura kick my door in."

"I'll call in dead!"

"I'd really rather not have the whole village kick my door in," Kakashi said dryly. "Now, listen to me this time. Yesterday was not supposed to happen the way that it did, and there's

no avoiding the fact that we are now in a mess. It's a mess we can iron out, but you need to give yourself time to think about more than just what you want for today. And for both our sakes please don't tell anyone about it. Okay?"

"All right," Naruto said reluctantly as the Jounin dropped his hands and straightened up, letting his own arms fall to his sides. "And we'll talk when I get back?"

"Yes," Kakashi nodded, sliding his hands in his pockets and stepping back

"What's your first memory?"

Kakashi blinked in surprise at the question, then grimaced and sighed. "Come on, you're late enough as it is. You need to get going."

Naruto scowled and made an agitated noise, tucking his dirty clothes under his arm so he could reach up and carefully situate Kakashi's mask over his face. The taller man stood there, completely bewildered, and allowed the blonde to tug him toward the door. Still having no idea what was possessing Naruto to move him around like a stage prop, he raised his eyebrow as the young man opened the door and stepped over the threshold before grabbing his hand. When his hand was pressed firmly over Naruto's eyes, he felt that same painful expression pull at his features as when Naruto had put on his mask as a blindfold.

"What's your first memory, Kakashi?" Naruto repeated.

"Try to remember to use the 'sensei' honorific in front of other people, and be sure to take care of yourself out there," he replied, feeling the silence between them weigh him down as he started to close the door. "...my first memory is my mother's funeral," he said quietly as he pulled his arm back and shut the door.

Naruto stood there for a few seconds with his eyes closed, fists clenched at his sides as he desperately fought the urge to kick Kakashi's door in himself. All he wanted to do was curl up in the man's arms and listen to him talk about whatever the hell he was willing to talk about for as long as he wanted to talk about it. It wasn't fair. He spun on his heel and took off toward his apartment at a dead sprint, hopping over rooftops to save time. For the first time in his life he wished he wasn't a shinobi, because he did not want to leave!

He'd filled in the empty spot on enough missions to know that schedules were reworked for couples whenever it was possible, and there was no way he could even ask for something vaguely resembling that. It wasn't fair! He had to keep on hiding everything, just like he'd been doing since that first dream turned his universe upside-down. God he hated it! It made his nerves crackle, and he simply wanted to start shouting and yelling so everyone in the whole fucking world knew he was pissed off *because he couldn't tell anyone how god damn happy he was!*

Fishing his key out of the pocket of his folded slacks, he darted into his apartment and left a trail of clothes behind him as he dove into the shower for a quick scrub-down. A peek in the mirror as he dried himself off made him halt, his fingers reaching up to trace the line of his neck and collarbone. There wasn't a blemish to be seen. Enraged at the injustice of it all, he

flung the towel into the apartment proper and stomped after it so he could throw on some clothes.

It wasn't fucking fair! He knew Kakashi had to have left marks from his teeth or lips, because his skin had tingled and jumped and felt so fucking good even after the man had stopped, and he really shouldn't be thinking about that right now, but he'd wanted to see the marks left behind, damn it! Even if he couldn't have showed that shit off to anyone who glanced his way *like he wanted to,* he at least would have had them there for himself. A secret little reminder of the absolute best day of his entire life. He zipped up his jacket and brushed his fingertips across his lips.

"Best mistake I've ever made..." Naruto grinned and tied his forehead protector on as he trotted to the kitchen area to feed his fish. "Hesitant bastard, you couldn't have scared me a little more?!"

He'd moved the small fishtank to the kitchen table so he could keep Kakashi's ANBU mask propped up against it without it being next to his bed, and the slender vase of paper flowers he'd kept from his stay in the hospital had gone to the bedside table to replace it. Sprinkling some food into the tank, he then carefully stowed the mask back in its box under his bed and hurriedly dumped his dirty things in the hamper in case Iruka would have to come in and feed the goldfish while he was gone.

Dashing out the door, he again took to the rooftops to get to the Hokage tower as fast as he could. He still felt a little odd hiding the mask like that, but after Kakashi's reaction to it he'd taken more care about making sure no one else might see it. He certainly hadn't expected it to be such a source of turmoil and...disgust from the Jounin, as if the mask itself was somehow a filthy dangerous creature. Then Kurama had been roused by his fit of temper after Kakashi had left, exacerbating everything by getting him so mad he'd gone after the man without bothering to put any clothes on. He never did find his towel.

Naruto bit his lip and dropped lightly to the ground outside the steps of the large domed building, trying to shuffle back remembered images and the feel of Kakashi's arm swept around his shoulders with the cloak draped across his bare back as he stood close enough to smell the man. He shook his head, wishing he could simply grab the first person he saw and brag about EVERYTHING! The fact that he was horribly late helped cool his heels as he ducked through the entrance and quickly traversed the halls to the Mission Assignment Desk.

He was expecting the dark expressions from behind the long table as he burst through the doors, narrowly side-stepping a Chuunin on his way out. What he wasn't expecting was for Tsunade and Shizune to then start gaping at him with a disturbing amount of astonishment as he approached the table. He gave them a bit of a disgruntled look, wondering what the fuss was about. It wasn't like he was the first person to ever be late.

They recovered quickly, though he immediately wished they hadn't, since Tsunade started asking him about his day off. He muddled through the questions with half-truths, and by the end of it Iruka was beginning to join in and give him a curiously scrutinizing gaze. Thankfully, they didn't pry any further than a polite inquiry, and Tsunade finally handed him his next assignment. After a quick scan of the paper, he very nearly threw it back at her.

"Two weeks in Iwa?!" Naruto protested vehemently, crumpling half the paper in his fist. "Why do you keep sending me on these joint missions?!"

"Naruto," Iruka scolded. "They requested you specifically, you should feel honored that you're a part of helping to maintain the truce we have with the Land of Earth."

"I know that," Naruto replied, his shoulders sagging as his temper deflated and he smoothed out the wrinkled paper. In truth he *was* honored and proud to be sent on the joint missions, but this one couldn't have come at a worse time. "It just feels like lately I'm doing more work for other Countries than my own."

"Such is the price you pay for wanting world peace," Tsunade smirked.

"Ah, Tsunade-sama? It is quite a long way from Konoha, and Naruto will be traveling alone," Shizune said thoughtfully. "Would Iwa object to us sending someone with him?"

"Hmm? No, I don't think they would," Tsunade said, tapping a finger on the table as she leveled her sharp eyes on the blonde and smiled sweetly. "Is there anyone you'd like to have accompany you, Naruto?"

Naruto blinked at the older woman, the flush to his cheeks a stark contrast to the cold sinking in his gut. The question had been asked far too casually, and even he couldn't miss the avid tension of the three adults as they waited for his answer. The temptation to say the name at the tip of his tongue was raw and powerful, made only harsher because there was a high chance he could request Kakashi without drawing suspicion. Unfortunately, it was a chance he couldn't take, because holy fuck *they knew he'd been with someone!*

He clamped his teeth shut and shook his head, turning on his heel and striding out of the room. HOW DID THEY FIND OUT?! Panic chased him down the halls, and he quickly checked his clothes to make sure he hadn't put something on inside-out. No, that wasn't it. Damn it! He'd made sure to keep his responses to their questions neutral, so what gave him away?! He racked his brain for clues as he sprinted back to his apartment to pack for the extended mission, but came up with nothing. How was he supposed to stop giving himself away when he didn't know what it was he was doing to give himself away in the first place?!

Slinging his backpack over his shoulder, he clasped his cloak at his throat and decided the best course of action at that point was simply to get the heck out of the village before he ran into anyone else. Adding to his steadily mounting frustration was the awareness that it would take him nearly three days to reach Iwa, which meant his two week mission was closer to three weeks. Three weeks away from Kakashi! Was the world conspiring against him?! Sure, it would give him time to think like the Jounin had asked him, but he still didn't know what the hell he was supposed to be thinking about!

Locking his door and pocketing the key, he tapped into Kurama's chakra and swiftly entered Biju Mode to transport himself a fair distance outside the North Gate. He was only beginning to contemplate using Biju Mode to cut a day off his travel when he was abruptly spun around within his subconscious. His concentration faltered in surprise, and the glowing cloak dropped as he stumbled on the tree branch he'd been aiming to jump onto. Catching his

footing to resume his pace, he split his attention and glared up at the fox who was flat-out gawking at him.

What is wrong with you?! Naruto demanded, shrugging out of the grasp at his shoulders.

You've been plucked! Kurama said, pitching his head back and laughing in wicked glee.

WHAT?! Naruto shouted, his face burning up as he again lost his footing and stared aghast at the fox. This was not happening!

Holy shit, look at you! Kurama practically crowed. *He fucked you good, didn't he!*

Naruto balked and slumped against a tree in wide-eyed denial at the nightmare unfolding in his own head. OH MY GOD, THIS WAS SO NOT HAPPENING!

Hell, he sure took his sweet time jumping your bones, Kurama chuckled, shaking his head. *I was starting to get worried he wouldn't land you before winter set in.*

He did not jump my bones! Naruto snapped, more than a little insulted that what had happened between him and Kakashi was being reduced to that term.

Oh? Kurama grinned with devilish curiosity as he stretched lazily forward to rest his chin on his palm. *So, you jumped his? Now this is interesting...*

No! No it is not! There was no jumping of bones, and I did not get landed! I won't let you call it that! It- He grimaced and cut himself off, curtailing his temper before he said too much. *It's none of your business, and I don't want to talk about it.*

Too bad for you we share a body, technically it is my business, Kurama said pointedly, flicking his tails behind him. *And it's painfully obvious you do want to talk about it, so you might as well just go ahead.*

Naruto glanced away and started leaping through the tree branches again, hesitating at the offer to be heard. Kakashi had told him not to tell anyone about what happened, but - much to his horror - Kurama already knew everything so it was a moot point. Keeping it all inside was already tearing him up, and he was fairly sure the fox wasn't going to let this particular subject slide. It was rare for Kurama to instigate a conversation, much less show a desire to keep it going when it could be easily dropped. He shot an irate wary look at Kurama, debating which torture would be less painful; talking to the fox and suffering the humiliation of his sharp-tongued teasing, or not talking and still suffering the same fate.

He asked me not to tell anyone, Naruto said with a slight scowl.

Geeze, were you that bad in bed? Kurama drawled.

*Kiss my ass, I was **fantastic!*** Naruto felt himself turn crimson as Kurama flicked an ear and watched him with silent amusement. He crossed his arms and darted his gaze away. *At least, I'm pretty sure I was good... Damn it, he had a good time! He said it was the best mistake he ever made!*

He called it a mistake? Kurama asked with thoughtful interest.

Yeah, and that it was a big mess now, because yesterday didn't happen the way it was supposed to.

Wait, wait. ***Yesterday?!*** The fox demanded, his eyes going wide in shock for a moment before he swung his head and glared daggers over his shoulder at the retreating scenery. He pinned his ears back and lashed his tails in irritation before turning back to the blonde. *Well, that certainly explains why you're lit up like a New Year fireworks display,* he sighed, dropping his chin in his palm again. *What else did he say?*

That I needed to think about what I wanted tomorrow, Naruto said, shaking his head in confusion.

Those were his exact words? Kurama asked, lifting an eyebrow skeptically.

No... Naruto mused, squinting as he recalled the conversation. *He said I needed to think about...more than what I wanted today. But I don't even know what the hell that means! What's there to think about?!*

Okay, we're going to pretend for a moment that you're not an impulsive idiot, Kurama said dryly, massaging his temples as he gave the bristling young man a flat look. *Kakashi was the one who said that, so it implies a certain amount of intelligence behind the statement. Don't worry, little one, I'll walk you through it,* he said with patronizing sweetness.

Naruto flipped him off and gave him a dark glare.

If he's telling you to think about more than what you want today... Kurama continued, ignoring the gesture. *...and you're not even going to see him tomorrow, wouldn't that mean he might be talking about you thinking ahead a little bit farther?*

How much farther?

How far are you willing to go?

Naruto felt his pace through the trees slow down as he regarded Kurama's serious expression, a tangled sensation of conflict rising in his chest.

A month? Kurama asked quietly.

He'd be back in Konoha in a month, and then he'd get to talk to Kakashi. That was an easy one.

A year?

Naruto furrowed his brows. A year wasn't that far away, why would he want anything different than now?

Five years?

The knot in his chest tightened. He'd never thought that far ahead, but he still didn't know why he would want anything different! He might be Hokage by then, that was the only change.

Ten years? Ah, but that is assuming Kakashi will still be around.

Naruto halted on a tree limb, digging his fingernails into the rough bark as he glowered scathingly at Kurama.

I'm only stating a real possibility, Kurama shrugged, his expression unreadable. *He was three heartbeats from death earlier this year, and there aren't many shinobi hanging around Konoha that are much older than him. So, if there are any sparkling little fantasies floating around your empty head with the phrase 'I want to be with him for the rest of my life', you should toss them out because they're a lie. You won't be spending the rest of your life with him, he'll be spending the rest of his with you.*

I don't care! Naruto shouted, shaking his head and kicking off the branch to burn some of his tension away. *I don't care how long, I'll take anything he'll give me! I know the life of a ninja is a risk, and there's always the chance we won't make it back home. I know that! That's why I want to enjoy the time we have while we have it.*

Well said, shinobi, Kurama chuckled softly. The inscrutable light in his eyes shifted to an impish gleam after a few seconds, and he drummed his claws on the floor. *Of course, there are other drawbacks to shacking up with another man if we're going to keep on talking about the future.*

Like what? Naruto scoffed.

You used to have a thing for that pink-haired bundle of mass destruction, didn't you.

Sakura-chan? He blinked, perplexed as to why Kurama was even bringing her up.

Well, she's got something that Kakashi will never have.

What? Naruto asked after a pause.

A uterus.

Naruto tripped rather spectacularly over the tree limb ahead of him, tumbling gracelessly to the ground and landing in a heap as he gaped at the highly amused fox.

What the fuck does that have to do with anything?! Naruto sputtered, untangling himself from his cloak and brushing the dirt off his clothes in angry embarrassed confusion.

I'm just saying... Kurama cackled, spreading his hands innocently. *He's never going to give you a kid, and, as talented as I am, I sure as hell can't just create an oven for you to cook a bun in. I thought I should at least point out the one important fact that procreating will have to involve a third party.*

I'm 18, he grumbled, jumping back into the treetops. *Procreating is not exactly on my list of things to do.*

True, Kurama shrugged. *But we're not talking about today, or tomorrow.*

I'll cross that bridge when I get there.

You want kids?

I...I've never really thought about it.

Kurama squinted at the walls and scratched his chin idly. *You're lying.*

All right, fine! Naruto snapped, flailing his arms in the room and pacing around a bit. *Yes, okay?! I did hope that maybe one day I'd... But it's not like I plan my future around that, it's just a thought! It's just a 'maybe' want.*

And if he doesn't even want a 'maybe'?

Then I'll cross that bridge when I get there, Naruto grated stubbornly. *Why the hell are we even talking about random stuff so far in the future?!*

Good point, Kurama said, swishing his tails and narrowing his eyes at the blonde. *After all, the two of you might not even last a week together.*

We'll last, Naruto said with quiet firmness.

How do you know?

I just know.

The fox grunted thoughtfully, folding his arms and settling his chin on them as he curled his tails around himself. *Congratulations,* he smirked, closing his eyes.

Naruto watched Kurama sleep for a moment, then abandoned his subconscious room to focus on making his way across the landscape at a decently fast pace. There were too many thoughts jangling in his head, writhing with half-formed questions and bouncing from memory to memory without clear direction. He let them rattle around for a while before attempting to sift through a few of them as he stopped for a short meal. He'd skipped breakfast in his haste that morning, and he was starving.

Kurama's prodding him to think years ahead remained a conundrum. What the hell did it matter if it was five weeks away or 50 years?! He paused and did some quick calculations. He'd be...68. Well, 69 if he rounded up a month. Cripes that was old! Kakashi would be...83. He shivered and took a swallow of water as Kurama's words drifted through his mind. *'You won't be spending the rest of your life with him, he'll be spending the rest of his with you.'*

There had been too much truth in what he'd said, too much understanding beneath it. His stomach twisted and he drew his knees up to rest his forehead on them. Kurama would have to bury him one day...just like he'd have to bury Kakashi. The idea was unbearable, and he

coughed as his chest constricted around his lungs. Gripping his arms around his knees, he cursed his weakness and helplessness. As much as he believed in what he'd said about accepting that inevitable fate, they were just pretty words in the face of that one painful truth.

The only way to avoid it would be to die before the Jounin, and the chances of that happening were slim at best. Was he strong enough to bear it? Could he look at himself honestly and say he was okay with it? He grumbled and scratched at his hair as he stood up. Of course he wasn't okay with it! He'd never be okay with it! But he knew he could accept it, and he knew he would endure it. He resumed his pace through the trees with a sense of renewed determination, though he had to shake his head at himself for going overboard and thinking things out way too far ahead.

They'd had one day together, and Naruto was planning funerals after his retirement. To say it was absurd as well as morbid would be an understatement. Wasn't the next step supposed to be dating? He paused as he jumped to the ground when the trees thinned out into a wide grassy plain, guilt making him cringe before he started running across the rolling hills in the early afternoon sun. Dating wasn't the next step...it was supposed to be the *first* step. He suddenly understood what Kakashi had meant when he'd said yesterday wasn't supposed to happen the way it did. They really were in a mess, weren't they.

Well, they'd spent nearly seven years - minus two and a half in the middle - together, that should count for something! Also, there was the two weeks he'd had Kakashi all to himself just last month. They'd gotten along great, even if he did sometimes make the Jounin uncomfortable. He hadn't been able to help himself. He'd been trying to figure out a lot of stuff at the time, and every so often Kakashi would say or do something that got him thinking.

Naruto had had no idea if he was even anything Kakashi would want, and he'd still been wrestling with the extent and turn of his own desires. There were only two times he'd seen the man show any kind of inkling toward another person, and his infatuation with his porn novels didn't count. The first time had been years ago, before he, Sakura and Sasuke had even entered the Chuunin exams. Kakashi had called it worthless when Naruto had suggested that the kunoichi spy, Hanare, might have loved him. The second time was the reaction to his transformation earlier that year.

That both of those times had been in response to women wasn't surprising, although it was disheartening. But then something had started to shift after their clash over the ANBU mask, and he hadn't been able to work out what it was. He'd wanted to ask, but he knew he couldn't. He'd been left with searching for some hint, just wanting to get closer so he could peek behind the walls as he'd tried to keep telling himself that he'd be satisfied with only that.

He'd find himself too close all of a sudden, and Kakashi's demeanor would go rigid at the intrusion of his personal space. But Naruto would have caught a glimpse of something beyond the neutral expression, and it was like a tiny little victory. Kakashi wouldn't turn away, or shove him away, or look at him with bewildered disgust, and Naruto had always been so incredibly happy about that. As boring as the low-rank missions were, those two weeks had been among the best times he'd ever had.

He snorted wryly. Well, except for the meal thing. Damn that man! He knew Kakashi had done it just to piss him off, but seriously?! Did he have to pay for every...single... He stopped dead in his tracks on top of a small hill, his eyes going wide at a dawning realization. Kakashi had been playing a game with him. For two weeks solid he'd been playing that game, paying for Naruto's meals *like it was a fucking date!* Picking up a stone, he spun around and hurled it in the direction of Konoha with all his strength, seething with an irrepressible fury.

"YOU SON OF A BITCH, YOU WERE FLIRTING WITH ME THE WHOLE FUCKING TIME!" Naruto raged at the empty landscape. "WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY ANYTHING?!"

Considering - up until recently - you've done nothing but run away screaming like a schoolgirl at the slightest hint of not-so-platonic affection involving another guy, what did you expect? Kurama asked with dry amusement, opening an eye to gaze at the angry youth.

"Shut up!" Naruto snapped waspishly out loud, turning and kicking back into a run toward the Land of Fire's border. "He was just doing it to aggravate me, how the hell was I supposed to know he was..."

Hitting on you? Kurama supplied with an impish grin as he lifted his head.

He probably wasn't! Naruto said, stomping his foot in the subconscious room. *You **tell** people when you do that kind of thing! You make it clear!*

*He was dealing with **you** , Captain Oblivious. And why are you trying to argue the possibility that he wasn't attempting to hunt his way into your pants?*

Will you stop making this all about sex! Naruto fumed.

Then what is it about? Kurama asked curiously, resting his chin on his palm.

*It's about wanting to be with him! I just want him there! I don't care if we never have sex again as long as I can just... **be with him!***

Lies.

*Fuck! I hate you! All right, I **would** care if we never had sex again, because IT WAS FUCKING UNBELIEVABLE!* Naruto shouted, waving his arms and flopping to the floor. *God I just want to chain myself to his bed and send clones to do all our missions...* He sighed and scrubbed at his face. *But I want more than that.*

Greedy little tart, Kurama chuckled.

I guess so, Naruto grinned, sitting up. His smile faltered a bit, and he pulled up one knee to lean against it. *He said I didn't know anything about him.*

That's probably true, Kurama shrugged.

He said we'd talk when I got back, though.

What are you going to do if you find something you don't like?

Why would I find something I don't like? Naruto asked, giving Kurama a puzzled look.

People hide stuff for a reason, the fox said pointedly. *He didn't want you to have that ANBU mask for a reason. He doesn't talk about himself for a reason. He covers his face for a reason, and I'm guessing it's not because he's hideous enough to make babies cry and old women faint.*

No, definitely not, Naruto smirked.

There you have it. You might not find him to be ugly, but that doesn't mean the reasons behind what he does will be pretty.

I don't care. There may be things I don't like, but there won't ever be anything I won't want.

It's flippantly benevolent of you to simply say you'll accept it without bothering to think about it, Kurama drawled.

*I accepted **you**, didn't I?* Naruto shot back with a sly grin.

Touché, Kurama laughed, pushing himself up onto his haunches so he could form a seal to begin molding chakra. *Well, let's get this show on the road. Your ass is going to burn a hole in the floor if we don't get you back to Konoha soon. Where the hell are we going, anyway?*

Joint mission in Iwa for two weeks, Naruto grumbled as he stood up.

What the fuck! Kurama spat, pinning his ears back and tossing a venomous look over his shoulder. *Is that old bat senile as well as blind?!*

Neither. She already knows, but I don't think she knows who I was with. She even asked if I wanted anyone to come with me for this assignment.

Then why the shit isn't Kakashi here?! Kurama demanded.

Because I'm not supposed to tell anyone, remember? Naruto quipped dryly.

You humans always have to make this crap more complicated than it needs to be, the fox growled. *Well, at least we can cut a day or two off this bitch of a trip.*

You like him, don't you, Naruto said, an astounded smile pulling at his lips.

What can I say? Your zoo of one gets awful boring, Kurama grinned, flashing his teeth wickedly. *Come on, let's get this mission over with so you can get back to that dangerous wild animal and see how this all shakes out.*

Naruto tipped his head back and laughed. Forming the seal to mold chakra along with Kurama as he closed his eyes in his subconscious, he let the golden cloak of Biju Mode swallow him up and transport him straight across the border.

And is the Game the Rabbit That the Fox was Chasing, or the Trap That the Man Set?

Chapter Notes

WARNING!! Okay, there is a short scene in here that you may or may not want to read. Sounds familiar, right? Kind of like the warning in chapter 8? This is a relatively tame one, actually, so don't get too flustered. And, as always, here is your ever-so-helpful installment of The Friendly Neighborhood Yaoi Survival Guide!

Here's what you do: When you see the word 'tangerine', start reading with caution! I know, I know, it's a ridiculous key-word, but just roll with me on this. The scene is only a few paragraphs, and it's not too graphic, so escaping trauma should be relatively simple. Good luck trooper! =D

Please don't worry if the title is a little confusing. It's referring directly to the lyrics of the song 'The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game' (Massive Attack does the best cover for it), of which this story is named for. I'll explain it a bit more in the last chapter, but please feel free to google the lyrics before then. =)

And is the Game the Rabbit That the Fox was Chasing, or the Trap That the Man Set?

Kakashi's eye snapped open in wild alarm and he swallowed a gasp, blinking at the shadowy half-lit forms of tree trunks a few feet away as he struggled to untangle his mind from the vivid nightmare. Pushing himself up to sit on his bedroll, he twitched his cloak open so it was off his legs and draped behind his shoulders. With a silent sigh he kneaded the back of his neck and willed his headache away as the lingering images of an old forgotten mission flickered behind his closed eyes and the whispered memories of screams echoed in his ears.

"Senpai?" Tenzou's voice asked quietly from Kakashi's left.

"Hmm?" When there wasn't a response, Kakashi opened his eye and turned a lazy inquiring gaze to the man sitting watch for the second half of the night.

The shade of understanding and concern in Tenz-Yamato's somewhat guarded expression made Kakashi cringe inwardly. Every night for the past week he'd woken up from a nightmare, and it was starting to wear on him. Bad dreams weren't uncommon for shinobi, especially if they'd worn an ANBU mask at some point. In actuality, it was much more surprising if a shinobi didn't have them on occasion. However, suffering from them night after night was never a good sign - particularly while out on a mission -, and Yamato had

every right to start hovering around the taboo subject. One does not simply come out and ask a man about his nightmares.

Kakashi shrugged in mute response and leaned back on his hands, looking up at the low canopy of leaves illuminated by the small fire Yamato was tending. He idly contemplated coming up with a blatant lie if Yamato pressed the issue, but that would probably just make things worse. Then he toyed with the idea of telling the truth, but the notion was rejected as soon as it formed. Barring the fact that he couldn't speak about the root of his troubles with *anyone,* he honestly did not want to see that look of horrified shock and disbelief quite yet. Even if it would only be fleeting before the anger kicked in and Yamato went Scary-face Mode on him for making such an absurd and tasteless joke.

No, he'd get enough of that when he returned to Konoha. He'd gotten lucky so far, having this assignment dropped in his lap by a familiar and oddly skittish ANBU agent while he'd been doing laundry shortly after Naruto had left his apartment. He hadn't had to face anyone in the village, and he'd used the day and a half it had taken him to reach the outpost that was directing the mission to steel his nerves and bury any outward signs that something was different. Unfortunately, his subconscious wasn't playing along, and he couldn't stop the nightmares.

He also couldn't stop coming up with reasons against the as yet unknown relationship between himself and Naruto. They piled themselves on top of each other in a twisted snarl, all linked in some way or another. He'd started off with one, and that had led him to another, which led him to two more, which both led him to more, and more. The nightmares added to the weight, gnawing at his patience and composure. He couldn't wall everything off like he used to, and he could feel his temper getting shorter by the day. The internal structure he'd built and maintained so painstakingly over his lifetime had crumbled, leaving everything in a scattered disarray that he couldn't do anything about because he had to wait.

He'd destroyed the original cornerstone holding the walls up himself and allowed Naruto to replace it, but that was all Kakashi had. Just a single new and excruciatingly unfamiliar cornerstone. Just one warm block he could lean against to ease the screeching itch in his blood that ached for Naruto's company. It provided a small island of serene calm within the turmoil battering around in his head and chest. It kept him quiet when the urge to spill his guts clawed at the back of his throat. It was almost easy to forget the bad memories and guilt when he was there, to ignore the suffocating pressure and simply...breathe for a little while.

"You know, Senpai," Yamato said thoughtfully, breaking into Kakashi's musings. "It probably isn't any of my business to say this, but-"

"Then why are you saying it?" Kakashi drawled pointedly, not turning his gaze from the undulating waves of motion the cool breeze was stirring in the treetops. He really did not want to maneuver his way through an unwanted conversation with a man who knew too much about him.

"Well, lately you've been looking..."

As Yamato trailed off, searching for the right word, Kakashi started scrolling through the likely possibilities that would finish the sentence. Tired? Conflicted? Distracted? Guilty?

Irritable?

"...happy."

Wow, that was definitely unexpected. Kakashi turned a startled expression to the younger man watching him with a mixture of curiosity and embarrassment in his dark eyes. Surprise quickly shifted to suspicion, but for all his scrutiny he couldn't pick up the baited lie in Yamato's features.

"I mean it," Yamato chuckled, pulling his cloak a little tighter around his shoulders and stirring the small campfire with a thin branch before leaning back against the tree trunk behind him. "It seems like everyone's been getting some kind of good news. Sai said something about having his first 'epiphany' the last time I saw him."

"Now there's a disturbing notion," Kakashi said, trying to steer the conversation in a safer direction. He was starting to feel a bit uncomfortable at the way his head was still reeling from Yamato's honest assessment of his apparently unconscious display of a cheerful demeanor. Shit, he needed to fix that fast.

"A little, yes," Yamato conceded with a touch of humor. "He was practically buried under the strangest assortment of books at the library, saying he needed to do more research on bonds and relationships. Then Sayako got good news. Then you."

"Who?"

"She's the kunoichi you're filling in for. Didn't they tell you why you were sent out here?"

"The ANBU who practically threw the mission scroll at me from across the room didn't really stick around to chat," Kakashi replied, stretching out on his bedroll and lacing his hands behind his head.

"Senpai..." Yamato sighed in exasperation.

"So? Tell me this delightful reason why my day off was so rudely interrupted," Kakashi continued blithely.

"If you'd stop torturing the current ANBU agents, you might find yourself with more free time," Yamato retorted.

Kakashi simply shrugged and remained silent as a smirk tugged at his mouth.

"Sayako had to step down from the mission so she could go on maternity leave."

Kakashi's stomach sank and twisted, but he still gave the canopy a genuine smile. "That is good news," he said truthfully.

A comfortable silence fell between the two for several minutes, and Kakashi was thankful for the reprieve so he could swallow the pang of regret churning up his insides. It was both ridiculous and logical to be letting his mind travel way too damn far into the future of a relationship that couldn't even be called a relationship, yet. Naruto and he were stuck in the

grey area of the borderlands, the thing between them remaining undefined until they could get together and talk about it. They weren't actually together, yet.

He sighed at his brain conjuring up the word 'yet' twice, and slung his arm over his eyes. Still, that's what made the train of thought logical; children were an issue that would inevitably come up, and he had a depressing lack of answers for it. He'd been on his own since he was six, and he'd never wanted kids. Or anyone else crowding his personal space, for that matter. Naruto had been orphaned at birth, and he was every bit the open-armed family type that Minato and Kushina had been. He latched onto people like a limpet and hoarded them like treasures, especially children.

Konohamaru had been the first, then Inari, Moegi, Udon, and the list just kept on growing. Nearly every kid in Konoha viewed Naruto as an older brother of sorts, and why wouldn't they? He was the village hero! Even if he liked to make an annoyed fuss when some of the bolder youngsters swarmed him with demands to tell stories or play, it was so heartbreakingly obvious the blonde craved it that it made Kakashi want to shrivel up and disappear. It didn't help matters that the remembered glimpses of those interactions were unbearably adorable.

Seriously, he needed to talk to Tsunade about fast-tracking Naruto through Jounin status so the idiot could get his greedy mitts on his own Genin team in a few years. If she was hesitant, he would volunteer to co-lead the team. That should dissuade any reservations on her part, and then they...could...do *what,* exactly?! Raise a pseudo-family of other people's kids?! What kind of bullshit was his mind even concocting?!

Yeah, he was a SHINING example of parenting! After adopting his first - and only - three children, he soon got one of them 'killed' due to his own over-confidence. He had known the fight against Haku would be tough, but he'd honestly thought Naruto and Sasuke would persevere if they worked together. They'd both had so much potential at that time it wasn't funny. But it hadn't been enough, and he'd failed as a guardian. His putting an end to the fight with Zabuza had come too late, and only the luck of having an opponent with a merciful heart had saved the teens.

It just got better after that, though! He'd entered them in the Chuunin exams, unknowingly offering up Sasuke to Orochimaru on a silver platter. He'd put his faith in the boy's willpower when he'd sealed the curse mark. But it still hadn't been enough! After Orochimaru's appearance and Kabuto's attack, he'd had no choice but to train Sasuke himself out in the middle of nowhere in order to protect him and everyone else. The location would have left Kabuto at a severe disadvantage in a one-on-one fight. The spy relied more on deception and cunning than sheer combat prowess.

It had also been isolated enough to spare Konoha any danger if Orochimaru had decided to show up, but it had still been within reach of swift reinforcements if it had happened. Sakura would have been safe within the village, and Naruto would have been safe with Ebisu. Sure, the other Jounin was something of a stick-in-the-mud, and Kakashi had been reluctant at first, but the Sandaime had been right when he'd said Ebisu's perception of Naruto had changed over the last several months. Plus, the man was a good teacher as well as strong and trustworthy enough to keep watch over the Hokage's grandson.

Oh, but wait, things just kept getting better and better! Teaching Sasuke the chidori, and training him how to fight so the boy could have the means to protect himself and his 'siblings' had backfired in the most horrific way imaginable. He hadn't been able to talk sense into Sasuke after his run-in with Itachi, and his need for revenge had consumed him to the point of leaving Naruto half-dead next to a river while he ran off to gain power from a serial killer. In the blink of an eye he lost custody of both remaining children, and was shuffled back into the fold of the unworthy because he couldn't abide his own failure. *Because nothing he'd done had been enough!*

And he had the unmitigated gall to think he was remotely qualified to make a second try at taking care of someone's kids?! Fuck, he couldn't even take care of himself! He was pathetic. Here he was, lost and floundering because after 27 years of being perfectly fine with his isolated life he suddenly didn't want to sit alone in the dark anymore. The man that impertinent, caring, irreverent blonde punk had grown up to become absolutely *refused* to let Kakashi unwind himself from around that stubborn finger. He was weak. He'd let Naruto in, and everything was in shambles after just one day. ONE DAY! One stupid impulsive day that...damn it...he was smiling. He really hated Yamato at that precise moment.

"While the subject of torture is still relatively fresh, I heard a rumor that you're teaching Naruto an old ANBU code," Yamato said, cutting into Kakashi's spiraling thoughts again as if on cue.

The Jounin grunted in reply, and he could almost hear the lifting of a dark eyebrow.

"So...how's that going?"

Kakashi felt the bark of laughter escape his mouth before he could even attempt to hold it back, and it was like the breaking of a dam. The mirth bled out of him in raspy tired chuckles as he let his arm flop off his eyes so he could see the wind play in the leaves above him.

"Awful," Kakashi grinned, the laughter still vibrating across his skin. "I told him to write a simple message requesting reinforcements. He handed me a request to assassinate the Hokage's seven wives...and their cats."

"Ouch," Yamato snerked. "How did you even get roped into trying to teach him?"

"I don't know," Kakashi sighed, rubbing his face. "Temporary insanity?"

"Ah, so you're not preparing him for-"

"He'll join ANBU over my dead body," Kakashi snapped darkly, a chill making his spine go rigid as bloody snapshots of his most recent nightmare flashed through his head. "And even then I won't let him," he said quietly.

"Can't blame you, there. He honestly isn't cut out for it," Yamato said, taking a deep breath and letting it out as if relieving pent up tension. "He really grows on you, doesn't he."

"Like a fungus."

"Shikamaru's on the exam board now, anyway. I don't think Naruto would be able to pass the written test."

Kakashi snorted, a smile curving his mouth again. "Shikamaru would make up a test to fail an entire squad to keep Naruto out of ANBU."

"True," Yamato chuckled. "Still, I doubt Tsunade-sama would even let him get that far, she cares for him too much."

"Ah, but that's the problem. She *loves* him too much," Kakashi said, slipping his hand back under his head. "You remember that whole Hiruko incident?"

"I was away at the time, but I do remember hearing about it when I got back..." he growled angrily.

Kakashi ignored the furious glare he could feel boring holes into him, resisting the urge to scratch at his forearm where he'd had Tsunade put the suicide seal on him. "She sent Naruto's friends after him. *His friends.* If she'd sent an ANBU squad or two she would have had him back in the village in a snap, but she didn't. She couldn't stop him from joining the war, either. She can't say no to her little brat, regardless of how many times the word leaves her mouth."

"He does have that effect on people."

"To an astronomical degree..." Kakashi grumbled.

"I'll be honest," Yamato said, poking at the dying fire again to stave off the chill in the night air. "If you hadn't come back from your mission when you did, back while I was stuck getting Naruto into shape, I don't know what I would have done. He was pestering me about you every day, and just would not stop."

"I've been wondering about that," he mused. "What did he ask you?"

"He wanted to know what you were like in ANBU."

"And you didn't tell him?!" Kakashi asked, turning his head to give his companion a dramatic astonished look to cover the ice writhing in his gut. "Tenzou, my respect for you grows by the day! How did you manage to resist such a golden opportunity for revenge?"

"I'm a glutton for punishment, apparently..." Yamato grated, his right eye twitching as he glowered at the Jounin. "And stop calling me Tenzou."

"There's no one else here, and you're still in the ranks," Kakashi shrugged.

"I don't get sent out much, anymore, though," Yamato said, stretching his arms over his head. "The Hokage's been giving me more civilian missions than anything, lately."

"Are you going to take the hint?"

"I was thinking about it," he sighed, dropping his arms and letting his hands slap on his knees. "Maybe at the end of the year."

"How auspicious of you," Kakashi chuckled, looking back up at the closed canopy. "So, you'll be starting the new year with a clean slate, eh?"

"That's the general idea, so don't go trying to jinx it for me."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Yamato-taichou," Kakashi said with sweet innocence.

"Yes, you would," Yamato said wryly.

"Hey, Yamato?"

"Hmm?"

"Congratulations on your retirement."

There was a heavy pause before Yamato replied, his voice thoughtful and curious. "Was there an announcement for the release of an unpublished Icha Icha novel?"

"Sadly, no," Kakashi droned coldly, rolling over onto his side to face the trees again as he pulled his cloak around him.

Crap, he needed to start acting more like an asshole to throw Yamato off, because it seemed he couldn't keep himself from leaking some weird aura of glee that the other man could detect. To make the situation worse he could feel the itch at the back of his throat urging him to talk, gagging with the need to confide in someone. To say it was an unpleasant feeling was an understatement. It scraped across his nerves like a broken knife as every instinct in his body railed against that damnable sensation he was not at all accustomed to dealing with.

Thankfully, the sound of small wings forestalled any further undesirable conversation, and Kakashi sat up as the dove landed on Yamato's outstretched arm. That was their signal, the enemy had moved into position. With the three other two-person teams hunkered in the area, they had the thieves surrounded. As disconcerting as the previous talk had been, Kakashi was glad he was partnered with Yamato. They fell into a familiar and seamless rhythm working together, and with the other teams cordoning off their own targets in an equally efficient manner, the hostages were kept safe and the fight was ended before dawn.

After the local officials came to bundle the criminals off to face their trials as well as escort the hostages home, the tired shinobi headed home themselves. There was again a blessed lack of opportunity for Yamato to bring up uncomfortable topics since all eight of them traveled back to Konoha together. A slick compliment to the younger man got Kakashi out of writing up and handing in the report, and he strolled leisurely around the village in the vague direction of his apartment while he searched for a chakra signature and a scent that was nowhere to be found. If that wasn't disappointing enough, then the scattered bits of late afternoon gossip he heard as he pretended to read his book were the nails in the coffin.

Fuck...the whole damn village knew! The only consolation - if it could even be called that - was that no one had any idea who had snatched up Konoha's most eligible bachelor. By the time Kakashi stepped into his apartment he was gritting his teeth and vibrating with the effort of keeping himself from just punching his fist through the wall. He'd been expecting this. He'd been anticipating this. There had been no way in hell that people wouldn't have noticed a change in Naruto. *He had known that!* So, why was it so infuriatingly gut-wrenching to listen to things he'd known he was going to hear?!

Shucking off his clothes, he stomped into the shower to wash the dirt and grime away. The tittering giggles of starry-eyed teenage girls playfully claiming to be the one Naruto was coming home to had him scrubbing himself raw with disgust. If only they knew! The whispers of the young women - jealous, regretful, envious, excited, calculating - with their sharp eyes searching, picking apart, and examining everyone around him to find the girl who'd snared the blonde prize had him toweling his hair till he felt bald. *If only they knew!* The chuckles and leers of the men making bets on which girl the Hero of Konoha had bagged, patting each other on the back and arguing good-naturedly over who was going to take Naruto out for sake first had him slamming his dresser drawer closed with enough force to thump the heavy piece of furniture solidly against the wall. ***If only they fucking knew!***

Kakashi stood there for a moment, trying to calm the irrational bout of fury as he carefully and deliberately put on his clean clothes without rushing. What the hell was wrong with him?! He should be feeling relieved that he wasn't even close to being in the realm of one of the suspected. It meant their secret was absolutely kept, and they'd be able to get together to talk without anyone being the wiser. IT WAS A GOOD THING, GOD DAMN IT! So, why couldn't he stop wanting to stalk the streets like a villain, shutting the whole fucking village up with a wave of raw killing intent?!

He could do it, too. He'd get his ass handed to him by Tsunade before she tossed him into a holding cell, but he wouldn't hear the gossip anymore. A thought broke through the whirling mass of nonsensical ire, clicking into his brain and wiping everything away with an eerie clarity. He was insane. He looked down at his hands in awe. He had finally gone over the edge and come completely unglued. It was strange, though. He'd always thought the moment he realized he truly had gone crazy would feel less...peaceful.

The peace molded into a disheartening truth that left him feeling hollow as he continued to gaze at his hands. They were all assuming Naruto had found himself a girl, and there honestly was no reason they shouldn't be thinking that. Why should they think otherwise? Even if there were a few somewhere that quietly rolled the dice in the other direction, they wouldn't be putting Kakashi's name in the hat.

Not him. Not the man who walled himself off from personal intimacy like it was the plague. Not him. Not the man who was once Naruto's sensei. Not him. Not the man who was...responsible...for...

Kakashi squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his fists till the nails dug painfully into his palms while he wrapped his arms around his violently churning stomach. He sucked air through his teeth, fighting back the urge to vomit as the acid burned his throat. This was worse than the last time, it was getting harder and harder to swallow it down. The strongest reason why he

never should have crossed the line toppled the mountain of others down on him in a crushing wave, forcing him to yank his mask down and clamp his hands over his mouth as he gagged.

The walls weren't there anymore to hold everything back. The only thing that stood against the flood of repulsiveness and bile was a single cornerstone, and he leaned into it frantically. He still had that. He could still hold onto that. The warmth slowly trickled down his spine, and he let the howling ache in his blood dampen the shrieking in his ears. The battle for dominance over his tumultuous insides was harsh, dragging the strength out of him as his knees threatened to buckle. But he held firm until the nausea passed, taking refuge in that small oasis until the serene wash through his senses made him feel numb and light-headed.

Stumbling the few steps to his bed, Kakashi flopped onto his side with his hands dangling off the edge of the mattress as he gulped in deep breaths of air. He wouldn't have to wait much longer, he could hold out until then. He closed his eye, forcing himself to relax the tense muscles in his neck and shoulders so the throbbing ache in his head faded. This was ridiculous, he was stronger than this! He could endure this, he just needed to focus! He just needed to shut everything off and stop thinking so much!

He didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until his cramping empty belly roused him the next morning. There wasn't any need to check his cupboards or fridge, he knew they were woefully devoid of edible goods. He needed to go shopping for food. Come to think of it, he needed to replenish his tea supply as well. Rolling out of bed, he got properly dressed before dumping a bit of water into Mr. Ukki the Second's pot and steeling his nerves as he headed out into the noisy populace.

Not wanting to risk possibly reaching his tolerance level, he stopped at the nearest available stand in the market district and bought just enough for a light breakfast before beating a hasty retreat from all the irritating chatter. The bench under his favorite tree was unoccupied, so he settled on the wide branch above it and went about making himself 'invisible'. It was a terribly handy trick, dimming his chakra and suppressing his presence till he might as well have been part of the tree for all anyone walking by took notice of him.

Pulling out an Icha Icha book, he spent the better part of an hour taking bites of his food when no one was around, and the remainder of the morning finally getting himself simmered down enough to where he was reading the words in front of him and enjoying it. When he saw Shikamaru pass by out of the corner of his eye, he paid it no mind. When the young man passed by again a few minutes later, he was slightly curious but continued to ignore it. When he came back a third time and plopped down on the bench below with a heavy sigh, Kakashi was forced to acknowledge the ominous sinking in his gut, but he still didn't look away from his book.

"Ah! There you are," Shikamaru said with lazy accusation. "I've been looking all over for you, Kakashi-sensei."

Kakashi lowered the book with a silent grumble at being thoroughly interrupted, and looked down at the Nara youth. He'd slumped himself into a boneless slouch on the bench, tipping his head back so it rested on the wood backrest.

"You've got good intuition," Kakashi said. "You kept circling around me."

"Meh, I've been hanging around the Hokage tower too much," Shikamaru shrugged with a wry grin. "You ANBU types are always popping out of the woodwork like ghosts. Troublesome lot."

"Can't disagree with you on that one," Kakashi chuckled quietly. "So?"

"I'm on an intelligence gathering mission," Shikamaru sighed noncommittally, his gaze wandering away from the Jounin so he could watch the clouds drift by. "It's more of a pain in the ass than usual, too. I don't know why they've got me wrapped up in this nonsense."

Kakashi felt the ominous sinking in his stomach begin to turn icy with dread, and resisted the urge to rub his temples. Damn that Shizune!

"Well, you've been in the village for longer than thirty seconds," Shikamaru continued. "You've heard the gossip topic of the month."

Kakashi gave a grunt of affirmation, turning back to his book as he concentrated on keeping his posture loosely reclined and his features neutral. Damn it, he did not want to be having this conversation! And yet...another part of him was itching to hear what the shinobi contingent suspected. He felt idiotic. It was like he was battling his inner teenager, except he'd never felt this way when he had been a teen in the first place!

"Shizune-san's tearing her hair out trying to find the person Naruto hooked up with before things get too catty while he's away," Shikamaru said, draping his arms over the back of the bench.

"When will he be back?" Kakashi asked, swallowing the urge to correct the 'hooked up with' label. It was aggravating that the term rankled him so much, and he knew Shikamaru didn't mean to imply the relationship might be a temporary fling. And it hadn't been! It had been- GOD DAMN IT! Crap, he needed to focus...

"Another week and a half," Shikamaru shrugged. "Though I'd bet closer to a week. Naruto's never been known for his patience."

"It's not that long to wait." ...WAY TOO FUCKING LONG TO WAIT...

"Easy for you to say, you've been gone the whole time," Shikamaru groused. "This is just like him, too. That idiot's all the way in Iwa and still causing trouble here."

"Gossip will be gossip, there's no point in trying to stop it when half the subject matter isn't even in Konoha."

"Heh, normally I'd agree with you. Unfortunately, the other half is about as good at hiding as you are, and three days ago there was a demand for a written marriage contract from a family outside the village."

"WHAT?!" Kakashi snapped his eyes away from the words he wasn't reading to stare furiously at the dark haired young man. Shit, that came out a lot more forcefully than he'd wanted.

"I know, it's unbelievable," Shikamaru grimaced, meeting the taller man's gaze with an irritated wrinkle of his brows. "They claimed Naruto had courted their daughter while he'd been on one of those low-ranked missions with you, and then...how did they put it? 'Took advantage of her pure-hearted nature with promises of marriage' when she was in Konoha right before Naruto left."

"Never happened," Kakashi said frigidly, turning back to his book and wishing he didn't have the sudden desire to go beat the hell out of a pompous civilian.

"Yeah, the Godaime sent them packing with a few choice words about trying to manipulate their own status by using archaic outdated traditions when a little research proved they were lying. I didn't think we needed to research it at all, the whole thing was ridiculous. But they were something of a well-connected family, and there was an old law that stated they had a valid claim if it couldn't be refuted with substantial evidence."

"How'd you get it overturned so quickly?" He asked, shifting a bit to ease the angry tension that had built up in his lanky frame.

"Tsunade-sama sent a photo of the daughter to Iwa, and asked the Tsuchikage to have one of his ANBU agents transform into her. 'She' bumped into Naruto while he was in the village, and he didn't recognize her at all," Shikamaru chuckled, turning his dark eyes back to the sky. "Apparently, when she tried to ask him out on a date he turned her down flat, and said something about being involved with someone else. With the Tsuchikage's seal of recommendation for the ANBU's report, the Daimyo and Hokage rejected the claim without a chance for appeal."

"It helps to have friends in high places who like the idea of peace between rival Countries," Kakashi smirked, looking up at the branches above his head and hating the foolishly warm feeling threading its way through him. God, he was so fucking pathetic!

"Not when they use the friends in low places to clean up their mess."

"Gossip is only interesting for so long, it'll die down sooner or later."

"Not soon enough," Shikamaru grumbled. "This crap is a serious drag, I don't know how women gush over it every day for hours on end. Naruto is Naruto, and he'll be with whoever he wants. I can't understand why there's such a rush to find out who it is."

"You're not curious?" Kakashi asked, regretting the thoughtless question even as it left his mouth.

"I suppose I am," Shikamaru mused placidly. "But it doesn't matter that *I* don't mind waiting."

"Hence why you were sent to mine me for information..." Kakashi drawled, turning back to his book with a subtle scowl.

"So?"

"So...what?"

Shikamaru gave him a flat look, and Kakashi closed the book before tucking it into the supply pouch at his back.

"All right, all right," he sighed, schooling his features into a neutral expression as he slid off the branch to stand in front of the young man. "Naruto didn't say anything to me while we were on those missions, and I didn't see him courting any young ladies," he said honestly, shrugging his hands into his pockets while the back of his throat started itching with the need to tell the whole truth so everyone would lay off the subject.

"He didn't seem interested in *anyone?"* Shikamaru asked dubiously.

"I wasn't with him 24 hours a day," Kakashi replied, trying not to grate the words out. He couldn't outright lie to the Nara youth, the damn kid was too smart for his own good.

"You two are pretty close, though," Shikamaru said with a touch of idle disappointment. "I was sure he'd have told you something."

"He didn't," Kakashi said a little too curtly, and started walking away in hopes of ending the conversation there so he could calm his restless nerves a bit.

"You never noticed any change at all?" Shikamaru asked. The question was phrased lazily, but there was a sharpness beneath it that set Kakashi's teeth on edge.

"I noticed a change, yes," he said somewhat dismissively as he paused and turned to look back at his interrogator.

"And?"

"And nothing," Kakashi replied with a lift of his shoulder, biting back the rise of his temper as he felt himself bristle. "He didn't tell me why he was acting a little different, and I didn't ask."

"So, you didn't see him eyeing up any women."

"No," Kakashi said flatly as he started walking away again. "It could be anyone."

"What about men?"

The soft question halted him before he'd taken two steps, and his spine went stiff as a board.

"You said it could be anyone, right?" Shikamaru's voice was almost indolent, and Kakashi could feel those dark eyes watching him curiously.

"And here I was under the impression you were trying to suppress the gossip, not add more rumors to fuel the fires," Kakashi said, the sweetness of his tone holding a vicious cutting edge as he smiled poisonously over his shoulder at the lounging young man. "I never saw him courting, nor 'eyeing up' any young men, either," he said with cold truth, the words leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

"I got it, I got it," Shikamaru said, lifting his hands in surrender before sagging back into the bench to watch the clouds. "It was just a thought," he shrugged. "No one's really going down that road, and I sure as hell don't intend to make things extra troublesome for myself by putting *more* goofy ideas into other people's heads. Ino's already got all the flower arrangements planned out for the wedding, and Chouji has a detailed menu for the reception you wouldn't believe. It's getting absurd."

Kakashi shook his head and forced out a chuckle because he was starting to feel ill.

"I'm not looking forward to going back to Shizune-san empty handed, but it can't be helped I guess," Shikamaru said with lazy melancholy.

"She'll survive," he said blandly, turning to walk away.

"It's not her survival I'm worried about..."

Kakashi simply lifted his hand in apologetic farewell and didn't look back. For a few hours, he let his feet wander aimlessly through the village to try to settle his nerves again. After making his way to the store that sold his favorite tea, he stopped at a few vendor stalls to buy food and found himself purchasing more tangerines than he really needed. Sighing helplessly, he finished his shopping and did his best to tune out the surrounding chatter.

When he stepped into his apartment, he didn't think the tangerines were going to present a huge problem. Yes, he was very much aware of what they reminded him of as his gaze lingered on his bed while he slipped out of his sandals, but that wasn't why he'd bought them. He liked tangerines. It was just fruit, damn it, and he was hungry!

Stowing the majority of his purchases away before relieving himself of his forehead protector, vest, supply belt, and kunai holster, he sat down on his bed and scowled at the bowl of orange fruit in his lap. The afternoon sun was pleasantly warm on his back as he broke one of the tangerines in half, and he expected the warmth to pool in his gut at the images the citrusy scent evoked. What he wasn't expecting was for that warmth to have a growling, insistent, burning underscore to it that had his breath coming quick as his heart sped up.

What the fuck! It was a god damn TANGERINE! ...that he just so happened to be trying to eat on his bed, where he had last indulged in eating that particular fruit along with someone else that had been half naked at the time and crawling up his lap as Naruto slid his tongue- STOP!

Okay, maybe the location was the problem. Scratching his fingers through his hair, he picked up the bowl that was kind of brushing up against what he was trying not to think about as he shifted somewhat uncomfortably, and moved to kneel on the floor. Except the wood was warm from the sun, and it only reminded him of the sensation of lingering body heat laid out on the floor writhing beneath him with legs wrapped around his waist and fingernails digging into his shoulders to pull him closer- AND WHY THE FUCK DID HE HAVE TO BE SO HARD RIGHT NOW?!

Kakashi set the bowl aside and doubled over till his forehead tonked a bit harshly on the floor. The things Naruto was doing to him weren't humane, they were downright diabolical!

Just a flicker of recollection, a few brief images, and his hand wandered over the warm floorboards, slipping over cloth to slide his knees apart as his hips twitched and his toes dug into the floor.

Everything was speeding up and getting muzzy in the heat of the sunlight spilling over him, and he licked his lips because he could still smell the tangerines mingled with the scent of sweat. That was all it took, and he could feel his muscles shivering and straining, screaming and roaring in his ears to relieve the tension. No long fantasies needed. No wasted time. Just flashes of that impish smile and hungry blue eyes, the taste of his mouth, the smell of his skin, the feel of nails scratching down his own back and teeth skating at his throat, the weight of legs clenched around his waist, and he was already dancing the edge of oblivion before he'd even gotten his trousers unbuttoned.

His fingers were cool, but he was used to it as he quickly freed himself from his now-restrictive clothing and gripped the rigid muscle between his thighs. They'd warm up soon enough, tacky and sticky-slick as he pumped hard because his blood was racing with a wildfire of lust and the head was already weeping. He bucked his hips into his hand, sprinting toward a release that was rushing through him way too fast for any kind of coherent thought as he buried his face in his arm braced against the floor.

A moan rattled past Kakashi's tongue, and he bit his lip to keep any other sounds contained. He was already trembling and tensing, his pace as ruthless and swift as the desperate need snarling under his skin and snapping through his bones. His breath was harsh in his ears, panting and gasping and finally choking back a cry as his body jolted and exploded in a mindless wave that had spots dancing behind his closed eyes.

His shoulders sagged as his senses calmed with each breath he took. Well, shit, that hadn't taken long at all, had it. Maybe it was a new record. Not that he was perverse enough to actually keep a record. Coughing out a chuckle, he pushed himself to his feet so he could wash himself and get a cloth to clean up the bit of mess on the floor that had escaped his fingers.

Feeling languid and a great deal better about the world in general, Kakashi scooped up his bowl of fruit and proceeded to finish his meal. As he dumped the peelings in the rubbish bin, he fervently hoped that his...enthusiastic...reaction would be a one-time thing. It would be beyond awkward if he had spontaneously developed a kinky fetish for tangerines, only to be faced with having to eat them in mixed company out on a mission some day.

He might have to get creative in how to blame Naruto for his aversion to the fruit. Although, since the blonde was infamous for being a prankster and getting himself into the most bizarre predicaments, he'd really only need to drop Naruto's name and add a few carefully worded vague phrases for others to nod in understanding sympathy. The fallout would be fantastic once the wheels of the rumor mill got hold of it, and Naruto would be livid.

Kakashi laughed in wicked delight as he flopped onto his side on the bed with a book in hand, scratching his stomach and filing that little idea away for possible use later on. Tapping the spine of his book idly on his blanket, he mulled over events of the day. There would be a lot of disappointed people when they found out who Naruto had been with. And they *would* find out. The young man was far too expressive, and his friends knew him well. Even if

Naruto contained himself above and beyond all expectations, Kakashi figured it would take two days maximum for someone to catch on.

He scowled thoughtfully at the well-worn cover of the blue-green Icha Icha Tactics book. It was surprising that he was only mildly disconcerted by that fact. The underlying guilt was familiar and uncomfortable, but he didn't anticipate being relatively okay with the idea of his personal life being broadcast throughout the village. He didn't necessarily like the notion, but there was a part of him that wanted everyone to know precisely who Naruto turned his attention to. They could make up the details on their own as long as they understood-

Sighing, he rolled onto his back and scrubbed his face. There was nothing to understand, yet! He had to stop with the irrationally possessive thoughts, they were driving him up the wall. Half of his brain was clawing at the inside of his skull shrieking 'He's mine, he's mine, he's mine!', and the other half was riddled with disgust because Naruto wasn't a piece of property to be claimed! He was an independent young man. An adult. He would make his own damn decisions.

The reality that there was a chance those decisions may not include Kakashi being in the picture was painful, knotting and crushing his insides till he found himself unconsciously rubbing his chest with the heel of his palm. Somewhere in the back of his mind the shadows whispered that it would be better that way. Naruto should be with someone closer to his own age. Someone who wasn't two years away from becoming a washed-up broken tool. Someone who would move into a big house with him, have a gaggle of kids, and give him a perfect life. Someone who had not once been his *sensei.*

He groaned at the twinge spiking up the base of his skull, massaging his fingers at a few pressure points to try to forestall the headache. Unfortunately, his brain was already throbbing in time with a petulant childish mantra; 'Mine, mine, mine, mine, MINE!' Fabulous. Not only was he stuck battling his inner jealous teen, he was also stuck with a shrill selfish two year-old. HE WAS 33 FOR FUCK'S SAKE! When had his brain decided it was a good idea to see just how it felt to be young and insufferably obnoxious?!

Grabbing the book that was laying next to him, he whacked it repeatedly against his forehead until his mind shut off and focused solely on the steady rhythm and discomfort. Having a distraction literally within his grasp, he opened the book and forced himself to read and acknowledge every single ADULT-ORIENTED word.

He read until he fell asleep, and he awoke flinging his arm out wildly as his fingers grasped at empty air. The early morning light filtered through his open window, and it took him a while to blink his way out of the after-images of the nightmare. The cynical side of him stirred first, idly noting that he couldn't even correct his mistakes in a dream. He hadn't been able to catch her then, so why should he be able to do it now?

Not enough chakra left. Too weak. Too slow. Too injured to get there in time. A thousand excuses scrolled through his mind as he let his hand fall to the mattress, and none of it mattered because he could still feel the ghosting whisper of her fingertips against his own as he reached out too late. He could still hear the silence roaring and echoing across the canyon walls as a flash of green light illuminated the darkness for a brief moment. Her body never hit the jagged rocks below, and he could still smell the acrid stench of dissolved flesh and

clothing that always accompanied an ANBU disposing of themselves before the outside world could do it for them.

Another successful mission. The loss of a comrade in ANBU was only a failure if the mission failed along with them.

Taking a few minutes to inhale the crisp fall air and clear the memory of that horrid smell, Kakashi rolled wearily out of bed and rubbed the tender spot on his forehead to try to dispel the headache behind his ears. He trudged to his washroom as he shoved all thought aside, mechanically turning on his shower to start his day. Thinking was not allowed at that moment, because he could feel himself starting to tear at the seams from everything that had happened over the past several days. All that needed to be considered was water temperature, soap, shampoo, towel, clothes, shoes, door.

By the time he reached the Mission Assignment Desk three hours later, he was feeling clear-headed but tired. Cripes, he just wanted a mission that would drive him into a duty-bound stupor and eventual brain dead exhaustion. Something that wouldn't give him the opportunity to focus on anything but the task ahead. Something that would last just over a week.

"You look haggard, Kakashi," Tsunade said crisply after a long moment of silent irritated glowering between him and the clock on the wall.

Kakashi sagged and returned her scrutinizing gaze with a dirty look. He was going to kick Yamato's ass if that man had ratted him out because of a few nightmares.

"I've never felt better, Hokage-sama," he said with a cheerfully false smile, easing back into his customary lazy slouch as he slipped his hands in his pockets.

Tsunade pursed her lips and scowled thoughtfully, shuffling the papers in front of her as if trying to decide what mission to send him on. It was somewhat uncomfortable, though he showed nothing but neutral disinterest. Normally, she had an assignment already picked out for him, and Shizune's look of subtle confusion only made the situation more suspicious.

"This scroll needs to be delivered to-"

"Tsunade-sama," Shizune interrupted softly with a strange mixture of shock, exasperation and concern. "That's a C-Rank mission. Kakashi-san can't waste his time with that."

Oh yeah, Yamato was definitely going to be coming home to a bed filled with senbon needles...

Tsunade gave Shizune a somewhat aggravated glance, then looked dead into Kakashi's eye and tapped her fingernail on the end of the scroll resting on the table. The Jounin simply looked back at her with placid inquiry, as if nothing was wrong. It was slightly unnerving being subject to her sharp gaze, and after a few seconds she made an irritated noise of defeat and snatched up another set of papers.

"This is a two week assignment," she said briskly as she held the papers out, and it took every ounce of willpower Kakashi had not to fold over in frustrated rage. "I want you back in

Konoha in half that time."

"Eh?" Kakashi heard himself utter, blinking at her in befuddled astonishment as he took the papers and scanned them quickly.

"You look tired, I don't like it," she continued, flicking her fingers dismissively and pointedly ignoring Shizune's silent mental crisis at the obviously spontaneous altering of the mission. "I'll send someone to replace you in a week."

"I do the work, and they get the glory," he said with dark amusement as he finished reading the details of the assignment. "I think I can handle that," he chuckled, turning on his heel to leave with a much lighter feeling in his chest.

Of course, the brightening of his mood wouldn't save Yamato from a world of hurt, but that was beside the point. It would take him a day to reach the location for the mission, a week of busting his ass to get everything set up for his replacement, and a day to get back to the village. Depending on when his relief showed up that was eight or nine days till he'd return home, and after Tsunade's comment he allowed himself the tentative fantasy of having two full days off when he returned.

Folding the papers and slipping them into his pocket, he hummed pleasantly to himself as he darted back to his apartment to gather the necessary gear. His chances of catching Naruto when he got back from Iwa were rising into the stratosphere, and he had landed a mission that would swallow his focus completely. It was like a little gift, and he tossed an amiable wave to a very bored looking Izumo and Kotetsu as he passed through the main gate. He just hoped he could pull everything off without dropping into a coma as soon as he saw that gate again.

So, in the End...

Chapter Notes

> You may end up getting very angry at this chapter. So angry that you want to leave. PLEASE DON'T! D: I'll explain everything at the end of the chapter, I promise! Just hang in there!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So, in the End...

Konoha was hauntingly still and silent as Kakashi passed through the main gate, and out of habit he glanced at the empty booth where the guards sat during the day. It wasn't uncommon to see it barren at that hour. The graveyard shift insomniacs liked to perch on top of the walls, able to get away with the impropriety because there was seldom any traffic in the middle of the night. He could feel their eyes watching him, making the back of his neck tingle slightly as he forced his feet to keep their steady loping pace.

He was too close to home, and what little energy he had left was swiftly fading simply knowing he was almost at the end of his journey. He squinted in concentration to maintain his pace and cling to his drifting sense of balance. If he slowed down now he might stop, and if he stopped he was fairly sure he wouldn't be able to start again without a lot of effort or a little assistance. All the buildings and streets looked the same in the moonlight, blurring into a monochromatic shadowy maze that he navigated instinctively with his only real thought being the inviting image of his soft bed.

He didn't bother with the stairs, mustering up just enough chakra to reach the second story window sill. It was a painful and taxing move, but it was well worth it. There were few things more aggravating than being inches from his apartment, exhausted and hardly standing up straight after tripping up his stairs because he kept catching the toe of his sandals on the steps, and not being able to get inside because he kept dropping his damn key. It took him a few seconds to steady himself so he could begin fumbling at the window latch. The agony screeching through his body was pushed aside with the single thought of knowing he'd be able to collapse right onto his mattress as soon as the window was open.

It was times like these that he wished he didn't live alone. He wanted someone on the other side of the door so he didn't have to burn chakra balancing on a ledge that was only a few inches wide. He wanted someone to open the blasted window for him because his clumsy fingers refused to acknowledge the decades of training they'd had, and were taking far too long to jimmy the latch. He wanted someone there when he finally slid the window open, catching him as he tumbled onto his bed, and letting him tangle and wind his arms and legs around a warm body till he drifted off to sleep.

But there was no one there tonight, just like all the other nights, and he felt a keening whine pressing at the back of his throat as he squeezed his eye shut and buried his face into the pillow. The dark empty room and soft empty bed afforded little comfort, and he dragged his cloak over himself as he shifted to face the window so his supply pack and kunai holster weren't digging into his side and leg. He was always so selfish when he was too tired to think, and somehow it was a little disappointing that he never wanted all that stuff by the time he woke up.

Except something nagged at his sluggish senses beneath the disappointment as his muscles turned to numb dead weight over bones that felt brittle with the pinging ache of chakra depletion. That wasn't right, was it? It didn't seem right since he wanted...well, maybe not all of it. Not yet. But that last part he did. Even as his mind tilted toward sleep he wanted to wrap himself around Naruto, holding him close enough to feel him breathe, and he knew he at least wanted that in the morning this time. That one silly selfish desire was what had dragged him out of the cloying mire of too-clear memories from his relentless nightmares for the last few mornings.

He would sit there on his bedroll as his mind tried to claw its way out of the dark, groggy from a scant few hours of sleep, aching from another day of pushing his limits, and gritting his teeth against nausea as he forced a ration bar or soldier pill down with too much water to convince his stomach that it was okay to be full. He would pretend not to notice how his hands trembled as he sharpened his kunai while he told himself that he could wake up with Naruto in his arms and not freak out like a crazy person. He would pretend to believe that the nightmares would stop, that they would all go away and he could dream peacefully with the smell of soft tousled gold putting him to sleep. His last conscious thought was that he really did have an odd fixation for Naruto's hair.

Kakashi awakened very reluctantly several hours later, unwilling to let go of the blissfully languid sensation of having had the best night's sleep in what felt like forever. Even as his muscles flinched at the unwelcome and familiar discomfort of having pushed his chakra limit too far, his mind tried to burrow back into the remnants of slumber. The scent of windswept grass and sunlight was curled around him there, and he could still hear the echoes of that carefree laugh. Pain lanced into his skull and he groaned. The laughter vanished as reality sank its sharp teeth into every square inch of him, but at least he could still...smell...

Bolting upright – and instantly regretting it as he doubled over with a pained gurgle – he fought the reflex to close his eye against the too-bright morning sunlight spilling across him. His window faced west, what had he done last night?! Panic eased some of the agony with a burst of adrenaline, but it sure as hell didn't make him feel any better as he stared wide-eyed at his surroundings. WHAT THE FUCK WAS HE DOING IN NARUTO'S APARTMENT?! This was bad. He hadn't done something like this since-

Shoving the thought aside and gritting his teeth against the shrieking complaint of his body, he molded enough chakra to get him out of there and onto a rooftop a few blocks away. He sat on the shaded slope for a few minutes to catch his breath, untangling his brain from memories he did not want dredged up by focusing on what he needed to be doing right at that precise moment. First priority was getting home. His OWN home, damn it! He needed a

shower and a change of clothes, definitely had to get some food and water into his system, and there was a report to write up. Eventually.

Carefully, Kakashi slid down the roof and landed a bit off balance in the narrow alleyway, stumbling forward a step to catch himself on the wall before his knees could fold. It was, unfortunately, far too unreasonable to hope he might get through the village without hearing some gossip. Naruto was due back soon, and he knew everyone would be getting antsy. Leaning heavily against the alley wall, he could feel the irritation already starting to well up. While he didn't particularly like the idea of walking the streets back to his apartment now that people were milling about, the idea of getting home and passing out because he kept pushing himself too far too quickly was higher on the 'Do Not Want' list.

He needed to conserve his strength and get his report in. Failing to show up because he was unconscious on the floor of his apartment would land him in the hospital for at least two nights, and with his luck Naruto would return while he was laid up in bed. And that would really suck. Swallowing the temptation to let his anger brew just enough to leave a bubble of malice around himself that would make anyone within earshot go silent, he took a deep breath and quashed his emotions down as far as he could before stepping out of the alley.

It helped that he had to concentrate on keeping his stride fluid while his muscles protested the abuse and denial of being allowed to limp. It also must have helped that he undoubtedly looked like hell, because every so often people would hush a bit as they caught sight of him. He certainly wasn't going to complain about it, and his head was pounding too much to even try reading into it farther than that. So, it was with a strained sigh of fuming relief that he managed to reach his apartment without incident. With his small bag of groceries he could make his favorite soup, and by that afternoon he would hopefully be able-bodied enough to pass the Hokage's inspection that would send him home instead of into Sakura's 'tender' care.

Kakashi shivered as he peeled off his dirty clothes and trundled to the shower to wash the anger and dirt away. Regardless of how much better he felt after gagging down the kunoichi's horrible medicine, he simply couldn't bring himself to voluntarily ask for the stuff. He'd be stiff and tired tomorrow, but the pain should be mostly gone by then and he was fine with struggling through a few miserable days on his own. After getting cleaned and dressed he helped himself to a large bowl of miso soup with eggplant, then sat on the edge of his mattress to use his bedside table as a makeshift desk while he wrote his report.

As always, it occurred to him that he should get a desk like he'd had in his old apartment. And, as always, by the time he was walking out the door after a few hours of being generally lazy he dismissed the idea of crowding his tiny apartment with unneeded furniture. Pausing at the top of the steps that led down to the streets he had no wish to traverse, he focused chakra into his feet and legs. The straining protest in his frame was more poignant than expected, and he frowned. He had hoped to have recovered a bit more after resting for most of the morning.

Weighing his options carefully, he decided to go with the lesser evil of eating a soldier pill. Tsunade would grouse at him, but it was better than arriving at the Hokage tower late *and* in a foul mood. It took a moment for the medicine to dull the aches and pains as his muscles were temporarily soothed and his chakra system was re-energized. As he took to the rooftops, he

was cautious of expending only the necessary minimum amount of chakra needed to get him to the tower at an easy pace. Taking a soldier pill just to turn in his report would get him scolded. Being reckless with the artificial energy boost would get him thrown in the hospital.

He was fully prepared for the trenchant scowl the Hokage gave him as he walked up to the Mission Assignment Desk, but he did not anticipate the somewhat weird look Iruka was giving him. The Academy teacher was only moderately more adept at hiding his emotions than Naruto was, and Kakashi did not like the expression on the man's face. At all. It made him uncomfortable. It was one of those 'I've seen a new side to you that I didn't know you had, and I'm sorry I didn't notice it before' looks. Seriously, it was kind of making his skin crawl, and he had to resist the urge to snatch his arm back as Iruka smiled and took his report for fear the man would grab his hand and...do something.

"If you think you can bluff me, Kakashi, I'll have you confined and tested for early stages of dementia," Tsunade said pointedly, drumming her fingernails on the table.

"Not at all, Hokage-sama," Kakashi said innocently, leaping at the opportunity to divert all of his attention away from Iruka's creepy friendliness. "I was just trying to get rid of a headache."

"And I suppose it has nothing to do with the new rumor floating around the village, either..." she smirked, lifting an eyebrow.

Kakashi blinked and stared blankly at her sharp gaze. New rumor?

"Oh? You haven't heard it yet?" Tsunade asked with far too much delight, her smirk widening into an outright leer.

Kakashi stood there mutely, fear sinking into his gut as he recalled the occasional incidents of quickly hushed voices when he'd walked home that morning. Damn it, he'd been too tired to listen! What new rumor?!

"Now, now, Tsunade-sama, I'm sure Kakashi-san has somewhere else he'd rather be," Shizune said with a soft giggle. "I doubt he wants to stick around here and listen to gossip."

Fear solidified into panic, and he could feel his head starting to throb as his mind raced. Shizune had *giggled!* WHAT THE HELL WAS GOING ON?! It was obvious the rumor was centered around him, but he had no idea what everyone could be talking about! Whatever it was certainly wasn't anywhere near the truth because Iruka would have been throwing kunai at him instead of-DEAR GOD WHY WAS THE MAN STILL LOOKING AT HIM WITH THE DISTURBING 'I'M SO HAPPY FOR YOU' SMILE?!

"True," Tsunade snickered, then straightened up in her chair and gave Kakashi a scrutinizing gaze he just wanted to flee from. "You look like a walking corpse."

"Why, thank you," he grumbled sardonically, his discomfort swiftly shifting into irritation. She was having a great deal of fun toying with him, and he was too wound up and frazzled to really care about keeping his temper in check. He just wanted to get out of there!

"Go home and get some rest," she said, though her stern tone was somewhat marred by the smug curve of her lips. "And for pity's sake, put on some weight. There isn't enough of you to stand up to a stiff breeze."

Now that was certainly uncalled for, and Kakashi tensed a bit in indignation. Okay, he'd dropped a couple pounds over the last few weeks, but it was hardly significant enough to be noticed, and certainly not worth being raked over the coals in public!

"You have 24 hours to report to the hospital for a physical," Tsunade continued, her poorly-hidden amusement not faltering despite the uneasy shuffling of the other people in the room. "Naruto's scheduled to be back in Konoha some time tomorrow evening or the following morning, and if you haven't had your physical by then I will not hesitate to send him out to hunt you down. Regardless of what plans you might have or how little there is of you to grab, I have every confidence in that young man's ability to find you, latch on to whatever he can, and drag your skinny ass to where you need to be."

Kakashi could feel his face starting to heat up with a mixture of embarrassment and ire, and he was glad he'd already tensed at her earlier barb because his frame was rigid now. He couldn't even come up with a suitable retort around his splitting headache and frayed nerves. Anything he said would come out wrong, anyway, because he was angry at her choice of wording for all the wrong reasons! Salvaging what was left of his dignity and composure, he gave her a curt nod, turned on his heel, and walked out of the room. As soon as he was in the hallway he heard Shizune's soft fierce scolding, followed by Tsunade's unrepentant chuckle.

Wincing slightly as he stepped back out into the sunshine, he took to the rooftops immediately and started making his way home. He needed to get to his *quiet and neighborless* apartment so he could cool down, eat a big dinner, and schedule his physical for the next morning. Halfway there he spat out a curse and came to a halt. Damn it, he needed groceries! The soldier pill was burning more calories than it was supplying, and he didn't have enough food at home to recover the loss much less give him some extra to spare so he wouldn't feel atrocious when he woke up in the morning.

His gaze flicked to the rooftops of the Market District, then lifted further to the edge of the village. He let his eye wander the horizon, turning toward Iwa with a sigh. It was so tempting it made his muscles burn with the desire to sneak over the wall and hunt for his dinner in the forests surrounding Konoha. He even knew the perfect spot to camp for the night so he'd have an excellent chance of catching Naruto before he reached the gate tomorrow. Easing himself down onto the ridgepole of the roof, Kakashi let his feet dangle off the edge. He scrubbed his face and then glowered at his hands as he let them flop past his knees while he leaned his elbows on his thighs.

He'd been sure that the difficulty of his mission would provide an adequate distraction, but it hadn't been nearly as effective as he'd hoped. Never in his life had he thought his ability to multitask could end up being so abhorrently frustrating. For nine days his stupid brain had taken every available opportunity to hover and pace around thoughts of Naruto. It had been an unceasing itch in the background, like the ticking of a clock, and no matter how hard he had tried he couldn't stop himself from constantly glancing over. God, it was frightening how much he had missed that idiot, twisting and bubbling under his skin like a disease.

Kakashi shook out his hands and scratched at his arms. He was a certifiable basket-case, and things were just plain getting out of hand. He didn't know what had put Tsunade in the mood to take such wicked pleasure in pushing all of his buttons, but he had risen to the bait splendidly, and had probably scared the shit out of most everyone else at the Mission Assignment Desk. Bloodlust was still crackling the air around him. He could feel it whisper against his skin and flutter at his ears like a cloak. There was no way he could walk through the village in that state, he had to get his head together and calm down.

Coiling his legs beneath him, he clenched his teeth at the pain blossoming behind his eyes and focused a burst of chakra that would take him to the edge of one of the training grounds near the Market District. His feet touched the ground in a crouch, and he relaxed down to one knee as he unfocused his vision and brushed his fingers over the grass until his headache receded to a dull throb. The path in front of him led in two directions; one was a long winding trail that would emerge in an open park near the vendor stalls, while the other was a short walk to the small glade where the Memorial Stone now stood.

The surroundings were a bit different, but the placement of the Memorial was the essentially same. There were a few more names added, and it was chipped on the left side, but the Stone was also essentially the same. Pain's attack had been devastating, but the Memorial Stone was made of stone for a reason. It was designed to weather the test of time, and it was not easily destroyed. It had been one of the first things dug up and relocated, the somber duty being taken up by the long list of names that should have been added to the Memorial but weren't. Naruto had seen to that miracle.

Kakashi plucked a few blades of grass, rolling them between his fingertips as he stood up and grimaced at the well-worn path. With a sigh, he let the grass fall from his fingers before stuffing his hands in his pockets. It pained him that he knew he couldn't find solace in the presence of the Memorial Stone at that moment. Just the thought of getting any closer to the names carved on the stone was making him queasy, and he pushed his feet to start ambling down the winding path that led back to the village. Even though he knew he wasn't in the right frame of mind to confront those ghosts, the urge to turn around and go there anyway churned his stomach and made his nerves buzz.

He knew he was running away, and an unhealthy part of his pride made him pause and glance back. Hunching his shoulders, he continued on his original path and told himself that it was okay to run away this time. He wouldn't be able to come up with anything to say if he went back, and he'd end up standing there until dawn wallowing in guilt. Not the smartest thing to do the night before a physical, and a large part of him didn't actually want to wallow. He never wanted to wallow. It was just that it always kind of ended up that way.

The distant sound of boisterous laughter halted his steps again, and he wiped his hand over his eye. Then again, him wallowing in guilt was substantially better for the well-being of the general populace... He'd almost gotten his infuriatingly erratic temper firmly tied down by the time he reached the edge of the open park, contemplating whether or not he should make another circuit through the woods before entering the Market District, when his already horrible day decided to get exponentially worse.

"Oh, Kakashi!" Gai called, waving his arm and making his way across the park.

Kakashi let out a quiet groan, sagging internally and staring longingly at his favorite vegetable stand. He had long since learned that trying to outright avoid Gai in certain situations was a futile waste of energy, and judging from the swiftness of Gai's approach and the tension in his movements, this was one of those situations. So he did the only thing he could; he placidly stood there as his friend circled and inspected him with an almost comical expression of intense scrutiny. He felt ridiculous as he weathered the examination, swallowing a myriad of retorts while Gai hummed and mumbled and poked his kneecap for unknown reasons.

"Yosh!" Gai smiled with a flash of brilliant teeth, striking a pose as he planted his fists on his hips. "We have not had a worthy battle in far too long, my eternal rival. I challenge you to an eating contes-"

"Janken," Kakashi interrupted flatly, digging his nails into the palms of his gloves as his anger started boiling through the restraints he'd put on it.

"Janken does not inspire the passionate flames of youthful vitality!" Gai protested, putting on his best frown of disapproval.

"Neither does indigestion," he grumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose as his headache returned with a vengeance.

"That is a matter of determination and willpower," Gai persisted.

"It's my turn to choose, and I choose Janken," Kakashi retorted stonily.

Normally he would relent and let Gai choose, but he could feel his eye twitch at the way Gai's stubborn gaze faltered and strayed briefly to his waist. What the hell was wrong with everyone?! He was the same as he'd always been! He was not wasting away!

Gai took a deep breath through his nose, radiating defiance and strength as he looked dead into Kakashi's eye with so much understanding that it made Kakashi's insides curdle. His jaw ached with the force of keeping it closed. He could feel his nerves screeching with the need to talk, to confide in Gai, to unload everything weighing him down and burning the back of his throat like bile, and he just want to punch Gai in the face to get him to leave! Damn it! He should have accepted the stupid eating challenge! Why was he being so irrational?! He knew he needed to get a good meal in, and now Gai had confirmed that something wasn't quite right.

"Bring it!" Gai said fiercely, planting his feet and swinging his fist out in front of him like he was about to battle a hoard of thousands of enemies instead of play Rock, Paper, Scissors with a childhood rival.

Struggling viciously against the insane desire to take a fighting stance as well, Kakashi held out his fist to start the game.

"If I lose, I will do 200 laps of walking squats around Konoha," Gai stated firmly, bringing his fist down like a hammer of doom.

Kakashi gave him a wry look and tried to concentrate on anticipating Gai's actions so he could get the contest over with and escape.

"And if I lose the next challenge, I will do my laps while carrying you on my shoulders."

Tie: Rock.

"Hey, don't drag me into your crazy self-induced penalty training. Have you ever considered that your absurd parades around the village are why you're still single?" Kakashi quipped dryly, and wondered what in the world had possessed him to open his mouth.

"You are indeed a worthy rival, my friend," Gai chuckled. "Even in matters of the heart I must strive to match you."

Tie: Paper.

Kakashi stared at Gai quizzically for a few seconds in silence, his blood turning cold as he recalled everyone's reaction to him at the Mission Assignment Desk. ...please no...

Gai bowed his head, trembling for a moment before lifting his openly weeping gaze with a glowing smile. "The flames of youth burn brightly within you, I'm so happy you found love!"

Tie: Rock.

...Yamato is a dead man...

"You look flush, Kakashi," Gai noted with a hint of concern beneath his blinding aura of joy. "Are you thinking about the lady of your heart's desire? Or did you perhaps eat some bad cheese this morning?"

Tie: Scissors.

"Neither!" Kakashi snapped more forcefully than he intended, desperately trying to piece his mind back together and kicking himself for getting his hackles up over the 'lady' comment because he was getting sick and fucking tired of people assuming and labeling and-DAMN IT, FOCUS! "How are those two things even connected in your head like that?!"

Gai bit his lip, his eyes sparkling, and Kakashi was struck with the terrifying notion that Gai was about to squeal like a girl and sweep him up into a hug. He took a step back and prepared to run, watching the man in front of him with unguarded horror.

"You are an inspiration, my friend," Gai said, puffing out his chest with pride. "I can't remember the last time I saw you glowing with such passion!"

Tie: Rock.

"You've lost your mind," Kakashi choked, his pounding brain practically going into hysterics because he'd only just managed to stop himself from adding: 'I'm telling the Hokage!' WHAT FUCKING ADULT SAID THOSE KINDS OF THINGS?!

"I'm so happy for you!" Gai beamed.

Tie: Scissors.

"Stop saying that! Where the hell are you getting this-" Kakashi gasped and swallowed the rest of his sentence as he caught the scent on the wind, his heart thundering in his chest while every inch of him tensed. He couldn't breathe, a relief so frantic and intense crushing him to the point that it took everything he had to just stay on his feet, to stay where he was, to stay quiet.

Win: Rock. Victor: Kakashi.

"You have taken the lead from me once again, rival," Gai sighed, slinging his arm around Kakashi's rigid shoulders and guiding him across the park.

Kakashi let himself be herded, unable to put up any kind of resistance while his mind sprinted in circles. He didn't know what to do, he couldn't think. He was drowning in impatience and he wasn't ready for this yet! Too tired, too worn down, too stressed, too edgy, too fidgety and itchy and clawing the inside of his chest, sizzling and screaming under his skin to run ahead and confirm with his eyes and hands what his other senses were telling him. To confirm that Naruto was home, that he was safe and whole and unharmed! He kept swallowing, trying to pay attention to what Gai was babbling about and letting the heavy arm across his shoulders anchor him from the chaotic whirling of his own thoughts so he could keep his breathing even and regular.

"Now, I realize that eating fruits and vegetables is very hip and cool, and they are a very vital part of a healthy diet," Gai said in what could almost be considered a stern tone. "But, Kakashi...my friend you need to eat more than just that to keep up with these vigorous youngsters."

Kakashi blinked and gave Gai a half-hearted dark scowl before he looked toward the street in time to see Naruto turn the corner with Shikamaru strolling lazily next to him. How in the hell he had forgotten how delicious Naruto looked was beyond him, but apparently he had. His fingers twitched with a sudden raw need to correct that mistake and thoroughly remind himself just how good that body felt in his arms, soaking in the warmth under his fingers, breathing in the smell of his hair, and getting drunk off the taste of his skin.

"You need to eat more meat!" Gai stated with firm conviction.

Kakashi closed his eye and slowly brought his hand up to cover his warming face, his entire being wilting and threatening to crumple at the images evoked by that oh-so-innocent statement. Dear sweet god, he was not prepared for this.

"Ah! Kakashi-sensei! Gai-sensei!" Naruto called, lifting his hand as he and Shikamaru spotted them and headed their way.

"It's good to see you, Naruto, you're back early," Gai called back.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Kakashi wondered how long it would take for someone to catch up to them if he just kidnapped Naruto and bolted right then and there. He'd caught the little pause before his honorific, and Naruto's smile was...just...god he was glowing! He was aware that he'd been very generous with his maximum estimate of two days before the bomb dropped, but he had sincerely hoped his minimum estimate of two minutes wouldn't actually happen. Maybe it was him. Maybe he was simply manifesting what he wanted to see instead of what he was actually looking at.

Naruto's eyes had a hungry look to them because he was a mere five blocks away from Ichiraku. His movements were a bit jittery and halting, fighting the compulsion to dart ahead because he was still wired from his long trip from Iwa. The air around him was vibrating and tingling across Kakashi's skin because he was too sensitive to Naruto's presence. He was raking his gaze up and down Kakashi because Tsunade had been right when she said he looked like a walking corpse.

"I really missed home," Naruto replied, still looking at Kakashi as he stepped up to them with a smile.

Kakashi was relieved Naruto had refrained from saying 'I missed *you',* but the tenderness in that smile said it for him and he felt himself caving in, and it was getting difficult not saying something dumb like 'Home really missed you, too'. His whole body was whining and howling and wanting to step forward even as he forced himself to try to lean back a bit...except Gai's arm was sort of in the way. A brief flash of panic caught his scattered focus, and he darted his gaze around at the people watching them curiously from where they shopped or walked by.

"You look tired," Naruto said leaning in a bit too close and scrutinizing the Jounin's face with growing concern.

"I just finished a mission," he said lamely.

Naruto was only inches away, chewing on his bottom lip, and no one else in the world existed anymore. Kakashi wanted to kiss him. Gulping back that urge and struggling to avoid getting swallowed up by those blue eyes, he forced his gaze to Shikamaru. Unfortunately, Shikamaru was rubbing the back of his neck and studying his feet intently. Kakashi couldn't see his face, but his ears were bright red. Suddenly Gai's arm felt way too heavy draped across his shoulders, and fear scratched at his senses again. He hazarded a glance at Gai, and immediately looked away from the thoughtful grimace

"Who won?" Naruto asked, glancing between the two men as he reluctantly backed out of Kakashi's personal space.

"I did," Kakashi replied with a shrug. Or, at least he attempted to shrug. It was rather difficult when Gai's arm was hampering the move like a lead blanket.

"I've always wondered...what's the prize?" Naruto asked, tilting his head.

"Eh?"

"The prize," he said, spreading his hands before tucking them in his pockets. "What do you get when you win?"

"Nothing," Kakashi replied, confused and trying to will his headache away so he could somehow figure out why Naruto was asking. "There is no prize."

"Don't you want one?"

"Not really," Kakashi sighed, scrubbing his face and wishing Gai would relax the grip on his shoulder a little. "Don't you have a report to hand in?"

"Yeah, but first a prize for the winner," Naruto grinned impishly, leaning in and pulling Kakashi's hand away from his face.

Kakashi froze and started praying again while the tension in Gai's arm started raising up several dangerous notches. A small stone was pressed into the palm of his hand, and Naruto took two seconds too long to release his wrist.

"I got it while I was in Iwa, it's called Tiger's Eye. It's pretty cool if you hold it up to the light and turn it around."

"Is it," Kakashi said with as much politeness as he could muster to hide the unbelievably idiotic disappointment at not getting a kiss. Of course, Gai's somewhat looming presence certainly helped in that respect.

He was familiar with the stone's properties, but put on an amiable smile as he obliged Naruto's suggestion and turned it in the light. That is, until he saw the number 30 scratched on the back. The rock was in his pocket in a flash, and he silently cursed as his face caught fire.

"Thank you, it's very...thoughtful..." Kakashi said weakly, torn between getting pissed off because he'd just been called a 'scrawny cat', or giggling like a lunatic because he'd also just been propositioned for sex. He settled for the icy pit of dread in the middle since Gai's restrained anger was starting to make his skin prickle.

"Right, I think we've wasted enough time here," Shikamaru piped in quickly, hooking his elbow around Naruto's arm and physically hauling the protesting blonde toward the Hokage Tower. "It's a pain, but that report is important. Later Kakashi-sensei, Gai-sensei."

Kakashi watched them leave wistfully, a completely illogical part of him wishing Shikamaru was dragging him away as well. But that didn't happen and wasn't going to happen, especially since Gai had grabbed the back of his collar and was the one dragging him back toward the path that led to the training fields in that area.

"We need to talk, my friend," Gai said, his voice low and serious.

Kakashi winced, looking down at the shallow furrows his heels were making in the dirt. "Well, that's going to be rather difficult during an eating competition."

"You declined that challenge, so I will choose another," Gai replied coldly.

Kakashi felt the grip on his collar tighten as Gai used a burst of chakra to transport them to the large training field farthest from the populated areas of Konoha. It was at that point that he knew he was royally fucked. He was released, and he simply let himself drop to a sitting position as he watched the barriers around the wide field flicker in response to their presence. Jounin and ANBU used the field precisely because of those barriers that buffered and contained the backlash of killing intent from sparring, and debris from enormously destructive jutsu techniques.

"I choose taijutsu," Gai growled, opening the first five of the Eight Gates in rapid succession.

"Gai, if you want to talk, then we can just talk," Kakashi sighed, pushing himself to his feet and fighting back a surge of nausea. He had suspected Gai wouldn't be real pleased with the news at first, but the man was angry beyond reason. It honestly hurt, digging and cutting into his stomach.

"How long have you been hiding this?"

"Not long," Kakashi bristled at the implications beneath the question and forced the words out through clenched teeth, meeting Gai's enraged gaze with a lethal glare.

"You told me once that he was a cute kid when he was asleep."

Kakashi saw red. Blind fury roared in his ears and burned his muscles as lightning skittered across his skin. He didn't remember uncovering his sharingan, nor did he recall the exact moment Gai opened the sixth Gate in order to dodge his chidori, and he really didn't care. Gai had gone too far, taking one sentence from a conversation 13 years ago and twisting it completely out of context. Naruto had been six at the time. SIX! He was not a god damn child molester, what the fuck was Gai trying to accuse him of?!

"That kid idolizes you, he always has," Gai continued, taking a stance a few paces away while the air churned around him, kicking up loose dirt and grass.

"He's a fool!" Kakashi bit out unthinkingly, crouching low to the ground and digging his fingers into the soil as he tried not to let the words get to him, tried not to listen to the unspoken words that were tearing him up inside.

"Kids usually are."

"Stop calling him a kid," Kakashi grated, fighting against the wrath clawing under his skin and writhing in his gut.

"You're right, he isn't a child anymore," Gai said with quiet venom. "You saw to that yourself."

The world focused down to a single point, crackling and burning at the edges. Kakashi was on Gai in an instant, lightning scorching the air in his wake as Gai grabbed his wrist and prepared to throw him. But Kakashi was already coiled and in position for the real attack, his heel snapping up into Gai's jaw with as much chakra as Kakashi could maintain. It wasn't

enough to break the hold on his wrist, but it was enough to send Gai stumbling back as he threw Kakashi clumsily away from him instead of slamming him into the ground.

Kakashi landed in a crouch again, gasping for breath as he braced himself on his fingers and the balls of his feet. It felt like everything was crashing around him, and he just wanted it all to stop. He wasn't strong enough to bear the weight of Gai's anger, it was as if the whole village was being piled on his shoulders. He didn't have enough energy to struggle against the lies and filth in order to explain himself. He couldn't get his brain to form sentences that would make everything clear, that would make everything better, that would just make everything stop!

"You always were a smooth talker, Kakashi," Gai said after spitting out a bloody tooth, walking forward slowly as he clenched and unclenched his fists at his sides. "And everyone knows that Naruto would do *anything* for you."

"Stop it," Kakashi spat hoarsely, ignoring the pain and screeching of his body as he forced more chakra into his limbs.

"What did you tell him!" Gai demanded, leaping forward with his arm pulled back and the air vibrating around his fist.

"Nothing!" Kakashi shouted, launching himself off the ground too fast for Gai to evade him at that distance.

His fingers found the right pressure points instinctively, drilling chakra into Gai's shoulder as his knee connected with the joint to dislocate it. Using his knee left him in a vulnerable position, but Gai had too much muscle and too much power for him to pop the joint with only his hands. In an act of what he knew was desperation, he used the purchase under his hands to spin around and kick his heel into Gai's chin a second time. But Gai already had a grip on the back of his vest, and he was allowing the momentum from the attacks to pitch him backwards so he could swing his leg up and catch Kakashi in the ribs.

All Kakashi could do was try to slip out of his vest and avoid a direct hit, he didn't have enough strength or chakra to defend himself. In the back of his mind he noted that it was a lot easier to slip out of his vest than it should have been. The thought was fleeting, however, as the shock wave from Gai's kick sent him hurtling across the training field, bones creaking and threatening to shatter, ears ringing and head spinning. Skidding to a halt on his side, he felt the pinging of dirt and rocks through the small tears in his clothing as he coughed and choked on the taste of warm metal. Why the hell was he trying to fight against Gai?! He wasn't in any condition to take on a damn Genin, much less the Green Beast of Konoha!

"You told him nothing?" Gai asked frostily, his footsteps making the earth shudder slightly. "I know the distance you put between yourself and others, especially when it comes to satisfying your needs, Kakashi."

...oh, right, that's why... "It wasn't like that," Kakashi croaked, pushing himself to his knees with trembling arms as rage lapped up the pain greedily.

Shadows whispered in his ears, he was detestable and cowardly, fabricating warmth in the arms of women he never saw again, whose names he never knew or never remembered. It didn't matter that there had only been a handful over the span of 13 years, and it didn't matter that they had agreed it would only be one night. He'd used them and left them. He'd left them smiling and satisfied, but he'd left them without ever intending to look back all the same.

"And yet you told him *nothing,"* Gai retorted furiously.

"There wasn't time!" Kakashi snapped, hating that it was a lie and wanting to bash his head into the ground for it, wanting to break his own bones because there was still some truth to it. "I need time," he gasped, sitting back on his heels as a surge of adrenaline and irrationality sent his thoughts spiraling in every direction.

He stared up at the sky, trying to breathe, trying to think. His shoulders hunched, curling in as he cringed and swallowed against the nausea. The idea of Naruto finding out about his past 'exploits' from someone else made him want to rip his stomach out. It hadn't been the same with Naruto, it had been different! He knew there was a way to explain how and why, he just needed time!

"How long will you wait before you tell him the truth?"

Flinching from the question, Kakashi closed his eyes in a vain attempt to block out memories from too many years ago. His fingers twitched and flexed with the desire to tear his hair out, to scratch and claw at his face till there was nothing left but an empty skull. The shadows cackled, twisted and writhing because there was everything to fear and nothing to be afraid of. Naruto already knew part of the truth. Part, but not all. Not the worst of it. He would tell Naruto the truth, *he just needed time!*

"How long will you play this waiting game? You do know he believes it was more than just a one night stand, don't you, Kakashi?" Gai asked with quiet menace, his footsteps coming to a halt a short distance away. There was a grinding cracking sound, and Gai grunted as he forced his shoulder joint back into its socket.

Kakashi opened his eyes slowly, killing intent rolling off his battered frame in waves as he focused his dark glare at Gai. He felt indescribably betrayed, the pillar of strength and support Gai had always been for him fracturing and crumbling beneath the weight of knowing he, himself, had been the one to betray that trust first. It was a tangled mess of truth and lies twined together, and he simply couldn't come up with the words to straighten it out. He wanted to scream and howl to make Gai understand, but he didn't know what to say.

"Just how much time do you need?!" Gai bellowed, stretching his arm back as Kakashi watched flames of chakra spin in the air around Gai's fist.

For a brief moment Kakashi felt something inside him bend and bow down to the inevitable. If this was how it was going to be, did he really want to fight a battle he couldn't win? Wouldn't it be better if he let Gai smash his head in so everything would stop and go back to the way it was supposed to be? That would be for the best, wouldn't it? Surely, that would be the best for everyone.

A wild inhuman elation ripped through him, pounding in his chest and thrumming in his ears. He'd always tried to do what was best for everyone. Tried and tried! Tried and *failed!* Again and again until he had to stop counting or he'd go mad! He felt his dry lips crack as he bared his teeth in a wide feral grin, shifting his weight and bracing himself while an insane glee knotted up his insides. Gai's fist came barreling toward him, and the air pressure resounded off his lungs as he tensed his muscles and let out a hacking broken laugh. He'd lived a long life, how much time did he need, anyway?

"Forever!" Kakashi snarled, springing forward and using the last of his chakra to keep from being blown away in the shock wave of Gai's punch as it sailed over his shoulder.

Gai's joint was already weak, so Kakashi only needed his hands to dislocate the man's shoulder again. He was in close, gripping the now useless limb as he pinned Gai's ankle with his feet and twisted his body to slam the heavier bulk into the ground with the sound of popping tendons. Gai's body was under an enormous amount of strain with the Gates open, it was the only advantage Kakashi had. Panting and heaving in air, he wobbled to his feet and took an unsteady step back as Gai struggled to get himself to a moderately comfortable sitting position.

"I didn't follow the rules," Kakashi said hoarsely, trying to find his balance on land that seemed determined to tilt to the left. He kept his eyes on the unnatural angle of Gai's knee, not trusting himself to be able to bear the expression on his friend's face. "The match is yours."

He turned toward the village, idly wondering if he was going to be able to make it back when he coughed out another humorless laugh that knifed through his ribs. Yamato was standing at the edge of the training field with two ANBU agents. It just wasn't his day, was it. Heaving out a groaning sigh, he limped his way to the trio and wished the cold anger on Yamato's face didn't hurt so much.

"How did this happen, senpai?" Yamato asked quietly, fists clenched and trembling at his sides.

Once again Kakashi was at a loss for words, and the lack of those words made him feel hollow and useless. He wanted to say a thousand things, spin a tale of a million words, and nothing would come out. Nothing would come to mind because he just...

"I don't know," Kakashi rasped helplessly.

He saw the blow coming, but didn't bother trying to dodge it. Yamato had the right to get a good clean hit on him, being something of a sensei to Naruto as well. His stomach clenched painfully. ...and for being a part of Team Kakashi. He stumbled back, knees buckling as hands caught his arms in vice-like grips. In the muddled haze of not knowing which way was up he thought maybe he should thank Yamato for hitting him on his left side. At least he'd be able to cover his black eye.

"Then figure it out!" Yamato hissed, walking past as he headed to where Gai was sitting.

"Sir, your presence is requested by the Godaime Hokage-sama," the ANBU on his left said curtly.

"'Requested', huh?" Kakashi mused, gingerly lowering his forehead protector over his wickedly aching sharingan as he squinted his other eye to try to get his surroundings back in focus.

His stomach lurched as the ground abandoned him, the world rocketing by in a blur, pausing a split-second once, then dissolving into unbalanced chaos again. It finally coalesced into a familiar hallway, and he blinked numbly at the door in front of him. He would have complained about the bruising grip the pair of ANBU had on his arms, but they were kind of holding him up at the moment.

"It was awfully cruel to do that to a guy with a possible concussion," he groaned, managing to establish a working relationship between his legs and the floor as one of them let go of him to open the door to the Hokage's office.

"I apologize, sir, but your presence was requested with all due haste," the ANBU still bracing his right arm said, walking the Jounin into the office.

Kakashi looked at the ANBU in silent dull surprise for a moment, then tilted his head and smiled sweetly. "Aww, that was nice of you to apologize. You're new, aren't you." The ANBU stiffened with a hint of indignation, releasing his arm as they came to a stop.

"Kakashi, stop teasing my ANBU agents. You're in enough trouble as it is," Tsunade drawled darkly, flicking her fingers to dismiss the two masked agents. Breathing a heavy sigh, she closed her eyes briefly and then pinned him with a sharp searching glare. "Dare I ask why your condition has substantially worsened since this morning?"

"I was taking the scenic route home and got lost in the woods," Kakashi replied blandly, wishing he could put his hands in his pockets but didn't trust his balance to sustain itself if he did. That buzzing cottony sensation that always heralded a week's stay in the hospital with tubes stuck in his arms was creeping up his spine. Tsunade remained quiet for a few long seconds, her right eye twitching.

"You are aware that Shizune and I have been trying to find the person that was with Naruto the day before he left for Iwa, correct?"

"Yes," he said, looking at Shizune for the first time since entering the room. She looked ill, hovering somewhere between shock and a strange sort of angry sadness that left him feeling confused and empty. He wasn't entirely sure he liked it better than the panic he *should* have been feeling.

"Do you know who it was?" Tsunade asked rigidly.

"...yes," he said, still looking at Shizune as the anger in her expression became more prominent. It was odd how easily the word 'yes' was coming out, like it was someone else saying it.

"Who was it?" Tsunade continued, her chair creaking softly as she stood up.

"I'm sorry," Kakashi said, turning to face the Hokage as the words came out with the same bizarre detachment. He hadn't said that to Gai or Yamato. He really should.

"I don't want an apology, I want an answer," she grated, her desk making ominous creaking noises as she placed her hands firmly on the wood surface.

For a few heartbeats, he didn't know what to say. The answer she wanted was so simple, and he didn't want to say it because the real answer was so much more complex and half-formed and unresolved, and he'd already lost Gai and Yamato, and he couldn't think, and he was so damn tired and sore! He heard the door open behind him, followed by quick steps and a startled gasp of apology at his elbow. But he wasn't paying attention to that, the scent of cherry blossom soap with a hint of antiseptic and bitter herbs was making his chest feel like it was being hollowed out with a scalpel, scraping his ribs clean.

He didn't want to look at Sakura. He really didn't. But he couldn't seem to stop himself. It was like he was caught by a horrible morbid need to see her reaction when the words tumbled out of his mouth. Everything was so quiet and still, and he almost laughed at his lingering urge to cringe and huddle away from those bewildered, horrified, ANGRY green eyes as she took in his less-than-stellar appearance. She'd grown into such a fantastically terrifying kunoichi, and he'd stolen the man she loved but had never been in love with.

"It was me," Kakashi said quietly, the sentence coming out like a dying breath. Except he could still breathe, an unbidden smile pulling at his lips as his foggy mind comforted his aching chest with images of flashing blue eyes, a devilish grin, and unruly blonde hair.

"What's going on?" Sakura asked him, fear darkening her gaze as she hugged the folder in her arms tightly to her chest.

"Sakura, we'll explain later," Shizune said a touch nervously. "Just wait outside for a-"

"What the hell is going on!" Sakura demanded waspishly as she cut Shizune off, and Kakashi could have sworn he heard an audible cracking sound as Sakura whipped her irate gaze to the two older women and took a step forward.

"Kakashi!" Tsunade barked fiercely, her tone commanding him to face her. He complied reflexively, his balance wavering because he moved his head too fast. "The Jounin code of ethics forbidding intimate relations with Genin, particularly those under his direct command, is in place to prevent the Jounin from taking advantage of his position of power to manipulate a younger and less experienced Genin in order to satisfy his own physical desires. Do you understand the fact that you have violated that code, and that there will be consequences for your actions?"

"Wait...*what?!"* Sakura asked, looking between everyone in the room, aghast and furious.

"Yes, Hokage-sama," Kakashi said, his stomach turning sour at the way Tsunade had phrased everything.

But even with that he was relieved that he was going to be formally punished. There was something stable and secure about it, and he'd rather have a black mark on his record as opposed to being dragged into a dark alley where she could beat the shit out of him without anyone else seeing it. Admittedly, he was very confused as to why Tsunade wasn't radiating enough bloodlust to castrate him with just a look, and all he could come up with was that he wouldn't survive it in his condition. Literally. He was getting the book thrown at him with a good dose of public humiliation because she still wanted him alive when it was over.

"This is absurd!" Sakura snapped, slicing her hand through the air and grabbing the front of Kakashi's shirt to haul him behind her.

He was at once very glad and very worried she was so strong. If she hadn't been gripping his shirt so tight he would have toppled to the floor, but it was unbearably painful watching her try to end the conversation by physically putting herself in the middle of it. Somewhere in the back of his mind, as he steadied his legs beneath him, it occurred to him that he was going to have to find a way to get his vest back from Gai sometime in the near future.

"Kakashi-sensei would *never*-"

"Then you will be reprimanded accordingly," Tsunade continued forcefully, straightening up and meeting Sakura's gaze with an unbending one of her own before pinning Kakashi with it. "Your pay will be docked starting today. I am putting you on one month's suspension, and you will be on a probationary status for an undetermined amount of time when or if you are reinstated as a Jounin. Because this situation involves a former student of yours, your records will be thoroughly investigated for any previous acts of possible misconduct. That being said, I will take into account that you are both of legal consenting age, and have not technically been classified as 'sensei' and 'student' for quite some time. Therefore, any further punishment will be solely contingent on the results of that investigation. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Hokage-sama," he said, reaching up to gently unwind Sakura's fingers from where they were still grasping his shirt. As he plucked the last finger loose he stared at her hand for a moment, wondering how something that could cause so much destruction could look so fragile.

"...sensei...?" Sakura whispered, turning to him with a stunned and almost unfocused gaze.

Kakashi flinched as if he'd been burned, dropping her hand and stepping back. Suddenly she was 12 again, and he was the dirty old man sleeping with her brother. His insides clenched with an agonizing wave of nausea, and he wanted to tell her everything. He wanted to explain how it wasn't as bad as it looked even though everything was exactly how it appeared. He wanted to say something, *anything*, desperate to get the right words out! But he just...

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, giving her a sad smile of apology for being so completely inept, and it tore him apart how frightened and small she looked.

"Damn it, Kakashi, get the hell out of my office and go *home* before I kick you there myself!" Tsunade shouted.

He took another step back, scolded and demure, and gave the women a small bow, gritting his teeth as his ribs reminded him that he shouldn't be doing things like that. She'd said 'home', not 'hospital', and he scrounged up enough chakra to get him out of the building before she changed her mind. Slumping against the shaded outside wall, he rested a moment to get his bearings while he convinced his body that it could get him all the way home. A flare of enraged chakra rattled the windows of the tower, making his bones shrivel and scream with the force of it. Hunching his shoulders, he pushed off the wall with grim resolve.

This definitely wasn't his day, and all of it was happening too fast. He wasn't getting a chance to even catch his breath. It was far too much effort to try to keep up appearances at that point, so he simply ignored the world at large as he limped down the street. There were too many phrases rattling through his head in an endless scathing loop. 'That kid idolizes you, he always has. What did you tell him! Naruto would do *anything* for you. How long will you wait before you tell him the truth? I don't want an apology, I want an answer. **How much time to you need?!** How did this happen? I know the distance you put between yourself and others. How long have you been hiding this? Kakashi-sensei would *never*- Figure it out!'

Figure it out. Figure it out. He had to figure it out! How did all of it happen?! He had to come up with *words*, damn it! He had to find a way to explain everything so it made sense, because he was not going to give up! He was not going to back down from this one thing! He was not going to let go! He *couldn't* let go! ***Naruto would be taken from him over his dead fucking body!***

The force of the thought shook him and he mentally back-pedaled a bit, blinking at the sound of shattering glass to his right. He looked up to see several civilians frozen in place as they stared at him with varying degrees of abject terror. The shopping bag at the feet of a woman on the verge of tears was probably the source of the noise, and somehow the whole situation seemed to be his fault. Wasn't it always? He was about to offer to pay to replace whatever was in the shopping bag when the air erupted with an insane amount of chakra, rocking him back on his heels to clutch his exploding head as four people materialized around him.

"What's going-" Naruto choked to a halt, balking at the sight of Kakashi as his Biju Mode cloak faded. "Oh my god, Kakashi, what happened to you?!"

Kakashi was distantly aware of Shikamaru and Chouji looking tensely around as if searching for a hidden enemy while Ino ran to the civilians to check for injuries, but he didn't pay much attention to it. Naruto was in front of him, scared and worried and angry, fretting and scowling and demanding answers as he hovered his hands an inch from Kakashi's arms, like somehow he would shatter if touched. Kakashi thought it was the sweetest, saddest, silliest thing he'd ever seen.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, brushing his fingertips across Naruto's cheek and feeling a ghost of a smile pull at his mouth at the warmth of that skin.

"Tell me what's wrong," Naruto said, his eyes going wide with fear as he snatched Kakashi's hand before it dropped, pressing it against his neck.

For a moment Kakashi was mesmerized by the rapid pulse beneath his hand. It felt too much like a bird caught in his powerless grip, fluttering wildly against his palm, and he was

suddenly afraid he might accidentally crush it or break it and wake up one day to find delicate feathers stuck to his fingers as the blood dried and soaked into his skin because that's what his hands were crafted to do. For decades that's what his hands had been trained to do. It was what they were still trained to do. It was what he'd been doing two days ago, and he tried to pull his hand away, feeling repulsive and filthy and afraid of-

"Tell me what happened, Kakashi! *Please!"*

"Nothing happened," he said, shaking his head to clear the fractured images away, his fingers still glued to the side of Naruto's neck because the blonde wasn't letting go of his wrist. He had to calm down. He had to find a way to get Naruto calmed down. "It was just-"

"You're lying!" Naruto shouted. "Why aren't you in the hospital!"

"She told me to go home," Kakashi responded without thinking, and it felt like he was dying inside looking into those frightened angry blue eyes.

The last of his strength began to crumble away, and all those things he'd been told clattered in his ears and tumbled against the backs of his eyes. He had to say something. *He had to say something! Something,* ***something, ANYTHING, JUST GET THE WORDS OUT!***

"It's all my fault," he whispered, flinching and cringing because that wasn't what he was supposed to say! That wasn't what was supposed to come out!

It felt like his knees were going to slide out of their sockets, and he knew the only things keeping him upright were the hands clutching his wrist and forearm. Why couldn't he do anything right?! He should have said something else! He looked away from Naruto's bewildered gaze, sick with shame, and met the eyes of an older civilian man watching him with open disgust. In his head he knew this was the part where he was supposed to be backing the hell away from Naruto as fast as he could, shoving his hands guiltily in his pockets and drawing as much attention to himself as possible so no one would remember Naruto had been the one holding on to him. He knew that's what he was supposed to be doing.

Except he just wasn't doing what he was supposed to be doing, and that hysterical glee gnawed a hole in his stomach as it bled out into his chest. His shoulders trembled with silent laughter. Or maybe it was fear. It might have been fatigue. He didn't care. All he cared about was the fact that the half-numb fingers of one hand were laced in Naruto's hair, and the other hand was sliding across Naruto's back to fist into the fabric of his orange jacket as he pulled the blonde in so he could *finally hold him!* And he had that fool's head resting on his shoulder where he could tilt his chin down to bury his face in that beautiful scent and *finally FINALLY breathe, for fuck's sake! He had waited so damn long!*

The rest of the world could go to Hell, and it didn't matter that he'd be cackling merrily all the way there himself one day because right now he had Heaven in his arms. Then Heaven exploded in a dizzying flash of light, and he was crumpling to his knees as he blinked hazily at his apartment. His heart pounded against the knifing pain in his ribs, keeping in time with the stabbing in his head, and he couldn't seem to catch his breath. But that was okay, because his fingers were still weakly hooked on the back of Naruto's glowing jacket, and there were

blessedly warm strong arms wrapped around him to brace him against the smaller chest as they knelt on the floor.

The warmth melted through his skin while the overwhelming chakra buzzing and rattling against his bones changed in pitch to a soothing hum, and he had the strangest notion that he was being absorbed into the Biju Mode cloak. It wasn't the same as when Naruto had transferred chakra during the war. That had been heavy and liquid, surrounding and coating him with raw power like a suit of tar armor designed to give him strength as well as protect him. This was different, and it was unsettlingly pleasant the way it felt almost wild coursing through his veins without any real direction, simply going wherever there was an aching gap to be filled.

It was similar to a medical jutsu only in the way that it took the edge off all the pain as the chakra supplemented his own to help get his body to start healing itself. The fog in his head faded somewhat to make a clear spot in the middle where he could think, but everything in his peripheral remained clouded and too far away. He lifted his hand curiously, reminded vaguely of earlier that year when his chakra had been unstable and he hadn't been able to kick Naruto out of his apartment before he passed out. Though it was a hell of a lot stronger this time, the sensation of feeling like the golden chakra was threaded and resonating with his own was the same. Huh, so that was how he did it.

"Kakashi," Naruto said, releasing his hold as the bright cloak faded away and he sat back on his heels to look at Kakashi with too much worry, too much fear, too much determination, too much gentleness, too much- "What happened? Just tell me the truth."

Suddenly it was Minato looking at him and saying those exact same words, and Kakashi had to scramble to the washroom so he could empty his stomach in the toilet. He almost didn't make it, his legs refusing to work properly and get him there quickly. It was all he could do to hold on to the cool porcelain while his innards tried to tear themselves free of his exhausted body, heaving and retching after there was nothing left to come up, and making it feel like his ribs were driving straight through his lungs. He gulped in air desperately when he could as dark spots danced behind his eyes and threatened to overtake him. As he felt his arms go numb he briefly wondered if he was going to black out and end up drowning in his own toilet.

Even as the thought occurred to him, he felt a spark of defiance creep up his spine and settle between his shoulder blades. Yeah...that was NOT how he was going to die, damn it. Coughing and gagging, he fought for control and became aware of a damp cloth on the back of his neck, a warm body behind him, arms hooked under his shoulders to keep him from sliding to the floor, palms braced at his temples to hold his head up, and fingers lightly scratching at his scalp in a soothing rhythm. How long had Naruto been doing that?

Latching onto the distraction, he swallowed against his persistently rebellious stomach until he could hold himself up and take a mouthful of the water offered to him to rinse away the foul taste burning his tongue and throat. It didn't help. The bitterness that lingered in his mouth came from the words that wanted to claw their way out of his lungs like a second round of vomiting. He clenched his teeth till it felt like his jaw was breaking because now was not the time to screw things up even more by saying things that shouldn't be said! But

when he dragged his weary gaze over to look into Naruto's eyes as the blonde carefully smoothed the wiry hair back from his sweaty face, he was rendered powerless to stop it.

"It's my fault," Kakashi said, shifting around and scooting clumsily back so he was leaning against the wall. He felt light-headed and his voice didn't sound like his own. It was hoarse and raspy and almost unfamiliar in his ears, and the disconnected sensation only spurred him on to say more of what his brain was trying to get back, trying to prevent from coming out.

"What are you talking ab-"

"I left Rin and Obito to die," he interrupted quietly, hypnotized by the confusion in Naruto's eyes. "I'm responsible for-"

"Stop it!" Naruto snapped, shuffling on his knees to lean his hands on Kakashi's outstretched shins. "I saw what happened that day, I saw that memory."

"You saw *his* memory of what happened," he said, feeling almost giddy from a vibrating rush of adrenaline, fear and elation. He couldn't stop. He wanted to stop so bad, but it was like standing in front of a tsunami and laughing at your inability to escape death.

"You went back for them," Naruto insisted angrily, shaking his head and digging his fingers into the muscle of Kakashi's calves. "You tried to save-"

"I tried to kill them by leaving them in the first place!" Kakashi shouted, lunging forward onto his knees to grab the front of Naruto's jacket.

"You didn't try to kill them!" Naruto shouted back defiantly, grasping onto Kakashi's forearms. "It was the middle of a war, damn it! You knew how important the mission was, you were only doing what you thought was right!"

"No, I wasn't! *I knew what I was doing was wrong!"* Kakashi railed, trembling and gripping Naruto's jacket with white knuckles as the shocked silence cut through his chest like a rusty blade. "The moment I told Obito we were leaving Rin behind I knew her chances of survival were slim, and the moment he left to rescue her by himself I knew they were both going to die. *I knew they were going to die, and I knew the right thing to do was to go with Obito so we could save Rin!"* He snarled, unable to look away from the warring emotions in those blue eyes, because inside he was thrashing and howling and frenzied, scratching deep furrows on the inside of his skull and tasting blood on his tongue.

"But according to the rules the mission was more important, so I chose to do the wrong thing. As a shinobi that's what I was supposed to do, and I wasn't going to make the same mistake my father did," he sneered, his skin crawling with loathsome disgust as he hunched in closer to Naruto. "I ignored the ideals he never once let go of even when he shoved a dagger through his own ribs and died on the living room floor to atone for abandoning his mission to save his teammates. I ignored the lessons *your* father taught me over the years that were so similar to his. I ignored the words of my teammate as he spat at my decision and called my father a hero while he walked away. I ignored the voice screaming in my head, telling me to go with him *because I knew he was going to die!"*

Naruto's nails dug harshly into his arms and Kakashi licked his lips, despising the wild grin that stretched his mouth and bared his teeth as if he were about to tear someone's throat out. "Tell me how it wasn't my fault that I was too late to stop Obito from blowing his cover, leaving me scrambling desperately just to keep him alive as I lost an eye. Tell me how it all would have happened the same way if I hadn't turned my back on them in the first place!" Kakashi demanded, shaking Naruto when the younger man squeezed his eyes shut and twisted his face into an angry pained grimace.

"Tell me how I'm not responsible for Rin's death," he continued relentlessly, a sickening terrifying anticipation coiling in his gut. *"Tell me how I didn't fail to protect her! Tell me how her blood isn't on my hands when it was **my fucking arm** through her chest! TELL ME, GOD DAMN IT! TELL ME HOW ALL OF THAT DIDN'T CREATE 'TOBI'! TELL ME HOW IT DIDN'T START A WAR! TELL ME HOW IT DIDN'T KILL YOUR PARENTS! **TELL ME HOW NONE OF IT WAS MY FAULT! TELL ME HOW I'M NOT RESPONSIBLE!"***

He was panting and gasping by the end of it, his voice cracking and straining at the words ripping out of his throat. A violent shiver ran through him, but he kept his hold on Naruto's jacket and paid no attention to the dark fog obscuring the edge of his vision. He had no idea why people always said things like 'You'll feel better if you talk about it', because that was bullshit. He didn't feel better, he felt hollowed out and empty, writhing and choking in the thick heavy nothingness and fear that remained. He felt foolish and ashamed, worthless and spent, unable to even find the energy to be furious with himself, and he just wanted to close his eyes and never open them again.

Exhaustion pulled at him with determination, lashing shackles to his limbs and stealing the strength from his hands as they flopped down to his sides. In a way, he was relieved at the possibility of not being awake to see the expression in Naruto's eyes, to hear things he knew would kill him. But there was a stronger sense of...something, maybe desperation or masochism or stubbornness that kept his eye focused on Naruto's slowly relaxing features. Then those eyes were open and looking at him, breaking him into a million little pieces because they were so sad, and he just didn't know how many times he could apologize before it started to sound contrived.

"And here I always thought you slouched all the time because you were a lazy bastard," Naruto said, a watery smile tugging at one side of his mouth as he reached up. His fingers were warm against the back of Kakashi's neck, loosely twined together and resting comfortably there. "You're going to hurt yourself carrying all that by yourself, Kakashi. It's too heavy," he said in a quiet wavering voice, biting his lip and pressing his forehead against Kakashi's collarbone. "You know you can lean on me, right? You know you don't even have to say anything and I'll take some of that weight off your shoulders, right?"

Kakashi couldn't breathe. He was trying to, really he was! But his lungs were being crushed from the inside and his throat was closing up and he couldn't think and he couldn't move. Astonishment and a roiling frantic thread of hope constricted around him, freezing him in place.

"You know I'm not going anywhere, right?" Naruto asked, his shoulders hitching and trembling. "You know I'm going to just always be here whether you like it or not, right? You

know you're stuck with me forever, right?"

No pity. No hatred. No anger. No stale phrases of sympathy or consolation. No words of forgiveness that he didn't want or need. No scolding or scoffing, telling him how wrong he was. No pulling back. No turning away. No hesitation.

The heaviness and tension melted off of him, cascading down his spine and out of his chest as he choked in air. His fingers scrabbled at the back of Naruto's jacket, clutching that soft hair while his eyes burned as fiercely as his lungs. It was like he was drowning, silent gasping sobs wracking his frame painfully, and he held onto Naruto with all the strength he had left. Which, to be honest, wasn't a hell of a lot, but it was enough. It was enough to let him believe he would never let go as the world started closing in on him. It was enough to at least show Naruto he was okay with the young man's crushing embrace as his body started to shut down. And it was enough to make him want to stay awake forever as the darkness swallowed him up.

Chapter End Notes

WAIT! DON'T COMMENT YET AND DON'T GO TO THE NEXT CHAPTER! You need to go to my profile and read chapter 13 of 'Certain Things Rearrange and This Whole World Seems Like a New Place'. It's important to get the whole picture of what happened in this chapter from Gai, Yamato, and Sakura's perspective! =)

...Who Caught Who?

Chapter Notes

HEY!

EVERYBODY READ CHAPTER 13 OF 'CERTAIN THINGS REARRANGE...' RIGHT?

IF YOU DIDN'T READ IT, YOU MIGHT GET CONFUSED HERE!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

...Who Caught Who?

Consciousness came back to Kakashi resentfully, trudging to his senses like an underpaid messenger that was fed up with all the crap they had to deal with. While he was fairly astonished that the pinging in his bones wasn't as agonizingly pervasive as he'd been expecting, every square inch of him felt like dead weight pulling uncomfortably at the dried up brambles that were replacing his skeleton. He didn't bother trying to move anything as he cracked open his eye. It was partly because he knew it would be futile, but mostly because he was slowly becoming aware of being in a somewhat peculiar situation. Everything was bleary and warm and...wet?

Blinking the haze out of his eye, he recognized the sight of his washroom through a thin veil of steam and idly assumed he must be in the shower. Giving himself a half-hearted internal assessment that yielded depressing results, he let his gaze drift around without moving his head from where it was resting on the bunching muscle of Naruto's chest. The position was at just the right angle for him to feel Naruto's steady thumping heartbeat against his skull, and it was a reassuringly grounding sensation. He wasn't dreaming.

His legs were stretched out on the tile floor with the damp weight of a towel draped over his lap, and from the angle of the legs on either side of him, he guessed that Naruto was sitting on the stool behind him rather than on the floor as well. Naruto shifted slightly and fingers started kneading his right shoulder, slippery and firm as the foamy sound of soap lathering up just made everything feel soft. Admittedly, Naruto wasn't all that skilled at massage, but what he lacked in knowledge of pressure points and general experience he made up for in taking his time while using the perfect amount of force.

The aching lumpy mush of his muscles was turned into a languid buttery substance as fingers worked their way down to his elbow at a leisurely pace. His eyelid was heavy to begin with, but now it was getting impossible to keep his vision from clouding over and darkening completely so he could properly wallow in the decadence of being pampered. He couldn't stop the sigh of contentment when his elbow was propped on Naruto's knee so water could be poured over his arm. It felt like the sound came up from his toes and tingled in his fingertips before exhaling through his nose.

"Geeze, you're awake?!" Naruto's happily surprised voice asked as he slipped his fingers through Kakashi's damp bangs. "Good morning, sunshine," he grinned, hunching forward to look at the Jounin. "You want something to drink?"

"'Morning," Kakashi croaked, unsticking his tongue from the roof of his mouth and managing a weary smile at the somewhat upside-down face in front of him. "I'd appreciate it, thanks."

"I hope you don't mind me taking the opportunity to molest you while you're incapable of escaping," he said with a cheeky wiggle of his eyebrows, straightening back up and holding a glass of water to Kakashi's lips as the taller man gave a quiet grunt of amusement before draining the whole glass. "Sakura-chan said sponge baths were fine, but I wanted to give you a real bath." He paused to fill the cup again at the tap behind him. "Well, as real as I can manage under the circumstances. You need a bathtub."

"I'd never use it," Kakashi replied after drinking half the water and flicking his fingers clumsily. "How long have I been out?"

"Not long," Naruto shrugged, setting the glass aside and turning the shower on. The hot water felt incomprehensibly sublime raining down on Kakashi, and it was getting difficult keeping his focus. "You should go back to sleep, I know you're tired."

"I'm tired of being tired," Kakashi said with a bit of a slur as he valiantly struggled to resist sleep, tilting his head back to give the blonde a disgruntled look at the evasive answer.

Naruto was too quick for him, though, and he forgot to ask 'What day is it?' out loud because there were warm lips pressed tenderly to his forehead. His motivation to make another attempt at voicing the question started a rapid descent, plateauing with a mental surly grumble at being forestalled by such an obvious ploy as Naruto looked at him with too-innocent eyes and craned his head away to turn off the shower. As pointless as it was to find out the date when he was all too aware of the fact that he wouldn't be awake much longer, he still really did want to know. He just wished the younger man would stop using such distracting methods to keep him from asking, because the way Naruto was kneading the muscles of his forearm with his soapy fingers was kind of turning the fabric of reality into goo.

"I never noticed it before," Naruto mused, resting his cheek against Kakashi's hair. "But you've got a lot of little almost-invisible scars on your fingers and arm. Is that from the chidori?"

"Something like that," he sighed, unsure if he should continue with the change in subject as he looked at his hand and flexed his fingers to dispel the chilly tension trying to settle there.

"They're bone cuts." He fell silent, the need to keep talking coiling in his chest while he bit his tongue and hoped Naruto would say something first so he could keep the words from coming out. Except he didn't. "I can't always pierce my arm through someone's chest without slicing myself on the jagged edges of their ribs." He felt Naruto's hands slow in their rhythmic movements, and he forced himself to swallow as he waited for Naruto to break the silence. But the blonde was being uncharacteristically patient.

"I started working on developing the chidori when I was nine," Kakashi said quietly, watching Naruto's fingers obscure the paler skin of his own hand in contemplative circles. "I was proud of it at first, it was powerful and effective. But I can't use it without the sharingan because the concentration it takes to maintain it while running at high speed gives me tunnel vision, and it leaves me defenseless at the last critical moment of attack. The first time I killed someone with it I almost threw up," he continued, feeling half hypnotized by the welcoming quiet of having someone just listening to him ramble on, and he turned his palm up to cup some of the water Naruto poured over his arm.

"I was ten at the time, and he was a grown adult with a lot of upper body strength. I wasn't strong enough to get my arm all the way through his chest, and I could feel his heart shuddering against my wrist. I wasn't expecting it. Later on I thought it would be easier if I put more power into the chidori so I could pierce my arm all the way through, but it didn't help," he said and dropped his hand to dangle his fingers off Naruto's tan knee, wondering when he was going to interrupt and stop the morbid monologue. "I can still feel the last convulsions of their hearts and lungs against my arm, and it makes me sick to my stomach every time. But that's why I don't like using a weapon as a conduit. When I stop feeling sick, I know I've finally turned into a monster."

The ensuing silence was only broken by the sound of water pouring into a ceramic basin. He shouldn't have gone on like that, he felt like an imbecile. Other people didn't need to hear those kinds of things, they just made him sound like a mental case. Pulling his elbow back, he let his arm slide to the floor, but Naruto caught his wrist before his hand hit the tile and propped Kakashi's arm back up on his knee. Mildly confused, he watched as Naruto started to wash his right hand again.

"You already did that," Kakashi said.

"I know," Naruto replied amiably.

He couldn't begin to try to guess Naruto's bizarre logic, and he didn't have enough energy to protest. He relented with a tired sigh, relaxing muscles he hadn't realized he'd tensed up as he sagged against the warm frame behind him. Fatigue was steadily making his limbs uselessly heavy, and he felt a twitch of indignation at how completely worthless his body was; limp as a rag doll and powerless as a withered old man. What a pathetic undignified sight he must be. It was damn near on the verge of mortifying.

And why the hell was Naruto playing nursemaid, anyway? This wasn't a situation he wanted the blonde to be saddled with, or ever feel like he was obligated to deal with out of a sense of duty to his former sensei. Well, that thought made him feel like 50 kinds of rotten garbage... He suddenly felt like the most unwanted and reviled D-Rank mission ever. Naruto really shouldn't be wasting his time doing this for someone who was better off being bathed by a

caring but coldly professional hospital nurse. He gave himself a healthy internal glare of disgust because he also knew he really shouldn't be enjoying his predicament so much either, indulging in the attention like a spoiled lazy cat.

He just couldn't help it though, it felt so nice and...*right.* It felt like he was finally home after years of wandering around blindly. He didn't want to be in the hospital. He *hated* being in the hospital. He wanted to be right here where Naruto was being downright meticulous about cleaning his hand, scraping every little speck of dirt out from under his nails and curling his fingers so his knuckles could be gently scratched and then smoothed over with the pad of a thumb. It was mesmerizing the way he was being so detailed, using his fingernails a lot to scrape at Kakashi's skin till it prickled and burned just a tiny bit from the soap that was massaged in.

By the time Naruto got to his wrist, Kakashi was blinking at his hand with a mixture of wonder and disbelief. His hand was clean. ***Clean!*** There had been times when he'd scrubbed his hands till he bled, and he'd never been able to feel this clean. It was as if he'd been given a new hand, all pinkish and fresh, tingling in the air as he felt every drop of water sliding off his fingertips. A shiver raced through him as Naruto reached his elbow, scratching at the calloused skin before straightening it out to get at the crook of his arm, and his heart sped up with spots dancing behind his eyes.

All the way up to his shoulder every last inch of skin was...'cleansed' almost didn't fit, and his mind strayed to the word 'purified'. But that was going ridiculously overboard, and he knew it. Still, it didn't stop the tightening in his chest, and the shuddering want - ***NEED*** - for more because, seriously, you weren't supposed to feel this good after saying something so awful. You weren't supposed to feel like 23 years of blood and death had just been stripped off of you because the man washing your arm had simply decided that's what he was going to do!

When the water hit his arm it was scalding hot, and he coughed out a laugh at how magnificently painful it felt because that was all new skin, and new skin should sting like that. His mind whirled with a torrent of a thousand horrific nightmares, each one writhing and screeching to get past his gag reflex so they could all be washed away. But his vision was spinning too much with the force of it all, and he was losing feeling in his legs and hands, and he couldn't catch his breath, and he knew that he was going to start vomiting until blood came up if he let just one of those horrors out, and he couldn't take any more! Not today, not yet, it was just too much!

"S-stop," Kakashi gasped, fumbling to reach behind himself and weakly grab the back of Naruto's neck.

"Okay, okay," Naruto whispered into Kakashi's hair, looping his arms and legs around him in a tangled embrace. "I won't do that again, you can go back to sleep. I'll cook you omu-rice when you wake up, you'll love it. You know how fantastic my rice is already, and I'm a master at cooking eggs. Hens all over the world tremble at my name."

"Idiot..." Kakashi chuckled, mirth pillowing the icy fog that dragged him toward the dark as his arms flopped back down.

"Yeah, you say that now," Naruto said, nuzzling brazenly against the side of Kakashi's neck with breath hot and vibrant against his skin. "Just wait till you taste my omu-rice."

The shadows gobbled him up before he could respond with anything other than a tired smile. The next time awareness came back to him it was with a jerky flinch and a muddled impression of something not being right. He was already up on one elbow, trying to get his useless legs to kick him away from what his other hand was gripping and pushing back when his brain caught up to him and slapped him to a halt. He quickly let go of Naruto's waist and went rigidly still, blinking in the late afternoon sunlight and wondering if it was even remotely possible that he would ever in his life maybe act just a little bit like a normal human being.

There wasn't a whole lot he could say to explain his reaction without it making him sound like a dissociative lunatic. He fingered a button on his pale blue-grey nightshirt as he glanced away from Naruto's startled gaze peering up at him from where his head rested on Kakashi's stomach. He was curled on his side in a pair of dark green pajamas dotted with little orange toads, an Icha Icha Paradise volume in one hand and his feet dangling off the edge of the mattress near the pillow. For a brief moment Kakashi wondered if he might get away with laying back down and trying to pretend that nothing had happened, but that fantasy was swiftly shattered when Naruto spoke.

"Gotta use the toilet?" Naruto asked.

"No..." Kakashi grumbled hoarsely, pressing the heel of his palm into his forehead as he slouched his shoulder against the wall and willfully ignored the sharp twinge in his side while his body started waking up. "Well, yes, actually, but that's not-"

"Are you in pain?" Naruto cut in as he set the book aside. Sliding his legs off the bed, he pushed himself up to sit next to Kakashi so he could sling one of the Jounin's arms over his shoulders.

"No, it was-"

"Did you have a nightmare?" He asked, wrapping his arm around Kakashi's waist as the taller man shuffled his legs out from under his blanket and over the edge of the mattress.

"No, will you please let me-"

"Are you gonna get all weird on me about being a jumpy sleeper?" Naruto interrupted again, blithely ignoring the Jounin's growing irritation as he helped the man hobble the short distance across the room. "Because if you are-"

Kakashi clamped his hand over Naruto's mouth and glowered at the far wall. "Just shut up," he sighed, tempted to give the irreverent punk a hearty electric shock as he felt the wide grin under his fingers. "Alright, you got me to the washroom, now go away," he growled without malice, splaying his fingers over Naruto's face and pushing him back out from under his arm as he grabbed the door handle for support. He didn't miss the cocky snicker as Naruto stepped back, and he shook his head with a crooked smile as he closed the door behind himself.

Several minutes later he was washed and feeling a great deal more human, and he opened the door to lean against the frame so he could eye Naruto's cooking with judicious suspicion. The fact that it smelled mouth-wateringly good didn't stop him from being wary. There was literally no account for taste at the moment since his stomach was quite willing to start eating through his own spine if it didn't get something solid to ease the emptiness. Still, the generous pan of rice and vegetables Naruto was stir-frying appeared to be retaining a lot of natural color, so he quirked a grin and limped his way back to the bed without comment.

As he slouched back against the wall next to the window, stretching his legs out over the narrow mattress so the sunlight was spilling across as much of him as possible, he couldn't help but silently chuckle at Naruto. He looked positively domestic standing at the small range. He also seemed to be enjoying every second of it as he scooped the fried rice onto a plate with a defiant glance over his shoulder. It was far too amusing, and Kakashi propped his elbow on the window sill next to Mr. Ukki the Second so he could lean his cheek on the palm of his hand as he watched Naruto's antics. The blonde was radiating a smug aura by the time he stuffed the rice into the egg omelette and added a drizzle of ketchup to the top.

"What, no tea?" Kakashi needled, arching an eyebrow as Naruto ducked into the small fridge for a glass of milk.

"Your ribs are cracked, you need the calcium," Naruto shot back, his cheeks flushing as he walked over to the bed.

"You're crap at making tea, aren't you," Kakashi smirked, reaching out for the plate.

"Let's just say I've learned the value of using honey and leave it at that," Naruto groused, setting the milk on the window sill.

Kakashi would have responded, but he was busy staring at the plate of omu-rice in his hands, an indescribably complex mixture of emotions and thoughts churning in him. Opening his mouth to say something, he glanced at where Naruto was flopped on his stomach with his chin propped up on his hands and his face glowing with eager anticipation as his feet wiggled impatiently over the edge of the mattress. Kakashi forgot what he was going to say, and closed his mouth to look back at the food.

He had never been in this situation before. EVER. And there was something decidedly uncomfortable about it that was tangled into a bizarrely pleasant giddiness winding its way through him. Total insanity aside, he was genuinely intimidated by the dish, and very worried about the taste of the omu-rice. After all, he was pretty sure he was going to go straight to Hell if he wasn't able to keep a straight face while eating food that had a heart drawn on it. In the odd panic and stupid delight swirling around his head, he suddenly wasn't even sure if he was allowed to cut into the heart-shaped ketchup art. He honestly had no idea how to go about eating the meal.

"Holy shit, you seriously look like you're about to have a nervous breakdown over omu-rice," Naruto said, his eyes wide in mystified concern. "Do you hate eggs?"

"What? No, I like eggs just fine," Kakashi blinked between Naruto and the plate, shaking himself out of the strange mess his thoughts had gotten themselves into.

"Does ketchup make you break out in hives?"

"No."

"Then eat it!" Naruto demanded with flabbergasted humor.

"You drew a heart on it!" Kakashi countered, pointing at the meal.

"THAT'S the problem?!"

"How am I supposed to eat it?!"

"Oh my god, you are completely crazy!" Naruto laughed, dropping his head to the mattress and pulling at his hair before looking back up. "It's just food, you're supposed to eat it however you want!"

Kakashi took a deep breath to try to contain the growing sense of hilarity at the ridiculous situation, lifting his spoon as he worked on a strategy about how to approach carving into the absurdly intimidating meal.

"You're so lost without me," Naruto snerked, plucking the utensil away from Kakashi and proceeding to cut the omelette into bite-sized pieces.

"You ruined the heart..." he whined morosely, taking the spoon back and poking at the sectioned bits of food.

"I will paint ketchup hearts anywhere you want to make up for it if you will just shut the hell up and eat!"

"Promise?" Kakashi asked slyly, taking a bite of the omu-rice with a deliberately suggestive arch to his eyebrow and sliding the spoon out of his mouth slowly.

"Don't tempt me, damn it," Naruto chastised mischievously, slinking forward to curl his head in next to Kakashi's thigh as he settled onto his side. "So, how does it taste?" He asked, tapping his feet on the wall below the window sill.

"I am properly amazed," he replied in honest surprise as he scooped up another bite of the hot meal. "It's really good. And I'm not just saying that because I'm hungry enough to eat shoe leather, either."

"Your snide remarks will not dampen my vindication, you ungrateful brute," Naruto sniffed archly, narrowing his eyes up at the Jounin before breaking into a bright smile. "You like my cooking!" He sang victoriously. "Do you want another one?"

"I'm not even halfway through this one, yet," Kakashi chuckled, taking a drink of milk. "Unlike you, I have a stomach with a bottom to it."

"Yeah, and it's about a millimeter from the top," he snorted.

"As much as I'd like to tell you how misinformed you are," Kakashi said dryly, setting the spoon down on the plate. "It's probably not far from the truth at the moment. I'm full."

"Already?!"

"It's been a while since I've had such a rich meal," he shrugged, handing the plate to Naruto as the blonde sat up. "If I eat any more I'll just get sick. By the way, how long have I been asleep?"

"A few days," Naruto mumbled around mouthfuls of food, quickly tucking into the remaining half of the omu-rice.

"You're not going to tell me what day it is, are you," Kakashi stated flatly.

"Baa-chan said you have a month off, it's not like you need to know the date while you're on vacation."

"It's a suspension, not a vacation."

"What's the difference?" Naruto scoffed, taking the last swallow of Kakashi's milk. "A month off is a month off."

Kakashi turned his head and looked out the window with a sigh, torn between knowing he should tell Naruto all the sordid details of his punishment, and really wanting to take Naruto's lead and let the subject slide. He fingered the dark curtain and turned back to watch Naruto lick his fingers and swipe at the corners of his mouth. It was established that Naruto had talked to both Tsunade and Sakura, given what he'd already said today and the other day in the shower...whenever the hell that was.

He couldn't bring himself to believe that either woman would have whitewashed anything. Tsunade hadn't held back with using the most uncomfortable terminology straight out of the rule book when she gave him his punishment, and Sakura had come unglued after he'd left. Though, there was a chance that they might have been tactful in their explanations if Naruto had reached them after they'd calmed down a bit. Either way, he would know the bare bones of what happened. A smile tugged at his lips, and he canted his head as Naruto gave him a questioning look. Leaning forward, he slid his fingertips on the underside of Naruto's jaw and darted his tongue out to sweep up a faint smear of ketchup on the whiskered cheek.

"Thanks for the meal," he said softly, delighting in the suddenly uneven feel of Naruto's breath brushing the corner of his mouth, and wishing his stupid body wasn't so debilitated.

A delectable shade of pink crept over Naruto's face, and Kakashi stayed right where he was as he smirked an inch from those slightly parted lips that were turning toward him. He could practically taste the raw desire rolling off the young man, but there was conflict behind the fire in those blue eyes, and Naruto's frame shivered in hesitation at that last inch of distance.

"...dishes," Naruto breathed, blinking as if startled at the word coming out of his own mouth. "I have to wash the dishes," he quickly continued, half stumbling over his words as he scrambled back and walked somewhat stiffly to the kitchen.

"Do you need a hand?" Kakashi let the question slide off his tongue with wicked implication as he leaned back against the wall.

"No, I don't," Naruto grated, shooting a glare over his shoulder as he covered the plate of leftover rice and put it in the fridge.

Kakashi didn't fail to notice the fact that Naruto was making sure to keep his back to the bed while he moved around, and he found it a little bit sad...but mostly irresistible. That idiot was being way too sweet because Kakashi's condition - or lack thereof - was painfully obvious. Regardless of the fact that he was certain Naruto wouldn't give in to the temptation he was blatantly offering, he still held some hope that maybe Naruto would cave in. Even if he didn't, it was way too much fun teasing him with it when the young man was in such a distressing situation.

"I could always sit on the floor and take care of the utensils..." Kakashi said, licking his lips.

"I can take care of my own utensils!" Naruto retorted as he tried to do everything he could not to look in Kakashi's direction, shuddering and gripping the shelf in front of him.

"Technically they belong to me," he grinned, catching Naruto's heated gaze and looking pointedly at the cook ware before he let his eye wander down the young man's rigid frame.

"That's...irrelevant," Naruto sputtered, his face turning a darker shade of pink as he scooped up the dirty dishes.

"Can I watch?" Kakashi leered remorselessly.

"NO!" Naruto shouted, his face finally hitting that last shade of crimson as he slammed the washroom door closed behind him.

Kakashi tipped his head back and cackled outrageously as the sound of the sink, the lower faucet in the shower, and the shower itself turned on full force. He flopped onto his side, the bubbling mirth refusing to be quelled by his protesting ribs. A few minutes later he was reduced to an exhausted and sore state, catching his breath and idly running his finger down the spine of the Icha Icha book on the mattress. When all the water was shut off and he heard the clanging of a pan being fiercely scrubbed in the washroom sink another devious chuckle escaped him, and he let his eye drift closed as the mundane noises lulled him to sleep.

He again awoke with an unsettling flinch, kicking and pushing back to get out from under the pressure weighted over his waist. But his back was already against the wall, and he blinked in the lamplight of the darkened room as his hand gripped fabric at the same moment his brain kicked into gear. Letting out a frustrated sigh, he scooted his elbow beneath him so he could lift his head up and prop his cheek on his hand as he relaxed his legs beneath the blanket draped over him. He let go of Naruto's sleeve and crept his fingers under the cuff, relishing in the ghosting whisper of the warm pulse under his fingertips as he lightly traced the line of the tan wrist.

"Not that I'm complaining, but why are you reading one of my 'porn novels', as you so eloquently like to describe them," Kakashi asked, tapping the edge of the book cover resting

against Naruto's chest and noting it was the next volume in the Paradise series. "I distinctly remember you calling them boring."

"Ero-Sennin used to drag me into proofreading his rough drafts while he was working on the very beginning of Icha Icha Tactics," Naruto said, reaching up to the windowsill for a glass of water before settling his head back on Kakashi's waist as he handed the glass over. "He never let me read the racy bits until he finally let me have that pre-release copy that I gave you. It didn't hold my attention past the first chapter because I'd read most of it already and I thought it was all so ridiculously cheesy.

"I started reading it from the first series to try and figure out what the heck you liked so much about them," he continued, setting the book down on the bed and scowling thoughtfully at the open page. "And now I'm sort of hooked. Wondering what happens next isn't going to keep me up at night, or anything, but I'll admit it isn't as boring as I remember. Even if it is way too corny with the mushy lovey-dovey junk."

"Says the man who painted a ketchup heart on my omu-rice..."

"Keep it up, buster, and I'll put a frowny-face on the next one," Naruto said tartly, sticking out his tongue. "Besides, you were the one who told me I needed to think about all this relationship stuff." He gripped the top of a yellowed piece of folded paper to flick the pages back as he angled the book more toward Kakashi. "And I'm pretty sure we're probably supposed to be doing this."

"I already offered to do that, and you emphatically refused me," Kakashi replied, glancing briefly at the page before placing his empty glass on the windowsill.

"Not that part!" Naruto glowered, his cheeks gaining a flash of color as he rapped the bookmark on Kakashi's forehead.

"Oi, be careful with that, you'll ruin it," he scolded, worriedly following the movement of the folded paper as Naruto brought it back.

"What do you mean? Isn't it just a piece of pap-Oh!" Naruto looked down in surprise as he cracked the fold open and then set it on the bed to open it fully. "It was stuck in one of the other books, and I thought it was just a bookmark. I never bothered to unfold it, I didn't realize there was a flower in it." He paused and narrowed his eyes at Kakashi in amused suspicion. "Sooooo...who's it from?"

"I don't know," Kakashi shrugged.

"Oh? A secret admirer?" Naruto lifted an eyebrow in mock accusation. "Should I be jealous?"

"Hardly," Kakashi said with droll humor. "While I realize it may be earth-shattering to hear, try to imagine a time before I ever had any interest in Icha Icha. I woke up in the hospital after trying to return from a mission when I was 17. I don't even know how I got there. When I looked at my bedside table I found that card, a copy of the first volume of Icha Icha Paradise, and an absurdly random bouquet that basically looked like someone had gone out

and cleared a hillside of everything floral. It was about as ridiculous as you could get, and it was obviously just a prank."

"You're right, it does kind of feel like the universe imploded a little after hearing you weren't born with a porn novel in your hands," Naruto snickered, then canted his head curiously. "But why'd you keep the card if it was all a joke?"

"I was using it as a bookmark," Kakashi said, looking down at the flattened and faded orange flower. He could feel Naruto watching him quietly, and his other hand strayed up to slide through the soft blonde hair. "I was in ANBU at the time and it was a lonely hospital stay. I lost my other two teammates on that mission, and it was kind of nice knowing someone was thinking about me...even if it was only to play a prank."

"I don't think it was a prank," Naruto said, his voice soft with tenderness. "It's a zinnia, it means loyalty and thinking of absent friends."

"I know," Kakashi said quietly as his stomach clenched, and he kept staring at the dried up flower because it hurt just picturing the gentle smile he knew was fading from Naruto's lips. He could feel the confusion starting to build in Naruto's frame, and could practically hear him wanting to ask 'What's wrong?'. "In ANBU a white zinnia means you're going to be the sacrifice that completes the mission. A red one means the rest of the team will be sacrificed to make sure you survive."

"...and orange?" Naruto prompted after a long moment of silence.

"Abandon the mission and get everyone home alive."

"You may not have noticed it due to my astounding gift at subtlety, but I really like orange."

"Yeah, I know," Kakashi replied with a fond smile, yanking lightly at Naruto's bangs before hooking his arm under the younger man's shoulder and hauling him over so he could lean down to bury his face in the blonde locks. "So do I," he whispered, taking a deep breath to clear his conflicted nostalgic thoughts as Naruto squirmed into the affectionate move. "You learned an awful lot about hanakotoba at that ryokan, 'Nina'," he teased, nibbling at Naruto's ear before propping his cheek back on his palm and sighing regretfully. "You'd have made a wonderful kunoichi."

"Shut up! You know more about the 'language of flowers' than I do," Naruto grumbled, gathering up the card and book. "Maia had five brothers, I was like a godsend and personal quest for her. She was determined to turn my 'tragically undereducated' ass into the perfect bride," he said, rolling his eyes good-naturedly as he shifted onto his back so he could look up at the man.

"It broke her heart when she found out you couldn't make tea, didn't it," Kakashi said with dramatic sorrow.

"It wasn't the best day," he sulked, looking away guiltily and slinging his legs over Kakashi's bent knees. "I wrote her a letter while I was in Iwa since the ryokan is right on their border, and I've been wanting to explain everything. I'm kind of dreading the reply. Well...that's

assuming there will be one." He wrinkled his nose and darted a sharp accusing gaze up at the Jounin. "But back to the original topic..."

"Oh? You've changed your mind about page 12?" Kakashi tilted a wolfish grin. "Can I call you Keoni?"

"No, you pervert!" Naruto laughed in exasperation, shoving the open book in front of Kakashi's face. "It's page 11! The part where we're supposed to talk about dating."

"I've...never dated anyone," Kakashi said hesitantly, wishing he didn't have the skillfully romantic and perfectly planned words the two characters had shared memorized. Reality was a lot more complicated and messy, and his personality already put him at an extreme disadvantage.

Naruto dropped the book to his chest and gave him a flat look.

"What? I said I've never dated anyone, I didn't say I've never had sex," he said, cringing as soon as the words left him. Why the hell had he even SAID that?! "Ah...not that I've been with that many women..."

"I somehow find that hard to believe," Naruto said dryly.

"Considering you were just a little bit mind-blowing that day, I could say the same thing to you," Kakashi retorted.

Naruto's face turned scarlet and he glanced away, biting his lip and doing a terrible job trying to hide a goofy grin. "Okay," he said, clearing his throat as he busied himself with tucking the card back into the book. "So, you've never dated anyone. No big deal." He kept gnawing on his lower lip thoughtfully for a moment as his blush receded. "Well...um...would you like to date me?" He asked, looking up and pulling the most apprehensively awkward smile Kakashi had ever seen.

"Don't you think it's sort of late for..." Kakashi trailed off, caught by the strange mix of feeling ridiculous even acknowledging the anticipation and glee, because he was way too old to be doing something like that, and putting aside the fact that he didn't know shit about it anyway, he was totally inept at that kind of stuff so it was going to go all wrong, and he would regret ever even contemplating he could try to... "Yeah, I think I would," he heard himself say weakly.

"Really?!" Naruto beamed, his entire demeanor lighting up with an almost radiant glow, and Kakashi could feel himself trying to sink into the mattress and disappear even though his insides were doing jittery cartwheels. "Then you can take me on a date tonight!"

"...tonight? Like...right now?"

"Not right this second, I need some time to get everything ready," Naruto said, rolling to his knees with an enthusiasm that set alarm bells ringing in Kakashi's head. "Dinner shouldn't take me too long if I use the stove at my apartment, and I'll take us to a quiet place to eat. It'll

be perfect!" He said, sliding off the bed and bouncing on his heels as he put the book back on the shelf.

"Wait, so you're taking me out-"

"No," he interrupted firmly. "*You* are taking *me* out, I'm just providing the food and transportation. What don't you want to eat?"

"Tempura?" Kakashi replied uncertainly, wondering if he'd ever stop feeling so bewildered around Naruto as he pushed himself up to sit and lean against the wall, and praying he'd never stop liking it so much.

Naruto clenched his fists and glowered scathingly at him.

"I hated tempura long before you forced that nightmare of a meal on me," Kakashi said defensively, holding up his hands. "I don't like fried foods or really sweet things.

"Then what do you like?" Naruto demanded, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Salt-grilled saury and miso soup with eggplant."

"I'll see what I can do," Naruto said, giving the window a calculating squint.

"There's no need to strain yourself," he drawled, quirking a subtle smile.

"This is our first *real* date, and I'm not going to let it get messed up," Naruto scowled, turning his gaze back to the Jounin.

"As opposed to the 'fake' dates?" Kakashi asked, arching a brow.

"As opposed to all those times you used every dirty trick in the book to pay for my meals just to piss me off! You are taking me out on a real date this time, and *I'm* handling everything," Naruto said with a defiant lift to his chin.

"Yes, dear," Kakashi said with patronizing meekness.

Naruto's cheeks bloomed pink again, and he crawled onto the bed with irked determination in his smile. "I'll pick you up within the hour, you nasty jerk," he said, leaning forward on his hands and knees to lightly bite a trail down the side of Kakashi's neck while he spoke. "So I suggest you get yourself ready, because even if you're still in the shower I'll carry your ass out of here with your cheeks bared to the gentle breezes," he threatened with impish arrogance, sitting back on his heels once he reached Kakashi's collar and tapped the taller man's chest with a finger. "You are not going to be late for our first official date."

Never let it be thought that Kakashi was incapable of adapting to situations which appeared to be hopelessly out of his control. He was very much aware of the fact that his body was in no condition to respond in the appropriate physical manner to Naruto's impulsive flirting, but that didn't mean he couldn't feel the heated coils of *want* snaking through his blood. It was an infuriating predicament being impotent and frustrated with desire. Shame and embarrassment were the first things that occurred to him, but they were quickly shoved aside in favor of the

idea of getting that beautiful tan body writhing and screeching under his lips and fingers alone.

Oh yeah, he could definitely do that... He knew exactly how to make Naruto's toes curl with an aching howling desperation, and all he needed were his hands. He had waited *so long* just to touch him and soak in the trembling feel of goose bump-covered skin, to taste him and get drunk off the tangy-sweet scent of sweat and pleasure, to breathe him in and hear that voice screaming his name! *He had waited so damn long!*

"I suppose a first deserves a first," he said, keeping his voice low and just a notch away from sultry as he lifted Naruto's hand to press the knuckles to his lips and give him a downright smoldering look through his bangs. "I'll be sure not to keep you waiting this time."

"G-good...you do that...and I'll...um..." Naruto said distantly, his muscles going slack as Kakashi very carefully reeled him in close enough to skate his teeth at that delicious throat as he snuck his hands up the back of Naruto's nightshirt to firmly grip the small of his back. "...*fuck*..." Naruto hissed and fisted his hands in Kakashi's hair, every inch of him vibrating as he let himself be guided to straddling the Jounin's lap, melting and pressing his whole body against the man.

"Although, I have another idea," Kakashi murmured, flicking his tongue at the edge of Naruto's ear as he slipped his fingers under the waistband of the colorful boxers peeking above Naruto's pajama bottoms. "Why don't you stay here and let me handle everything," he continued with soft persuasion, nibbling and licking the openly offered curve of Naruto's neck, and sliding his hands down the back of his pants.

Unfortunately, just as he was about to reach the bottom of that rounded and toned flesh, there were hands grabbing his wrists and jerking them up onto the wall above his head. It took an enormous amount of willpower to keep himself from trying to break the hold, even when he knew damn well he didn't yet have the strength to succeed. Gritting his teeth for a moment, he took measure of the situation to come up with a way to turn things around again. Not that he was averse to the position itself, mind you, but the problem was that Naruto was inching his way *back* along his thighs.

"Damn you, Kakashi," Naruto panted, his voice husky and thick with fury and lust as he glared at the Jounin. "You're a dirty cheater."

"I was only making a suggestion," Kakashi said smoothly, his mind racing through possible ways to get Naruto *moving forward again* without the use of the arms that were pinned above him.

"Yeah, well, your suggestively wandering hands aren't allowed near my nether regions until you're fully recovered," Naruto snapped as he sat on Kakashi's knees, huffing in air and hunching over to let the loose edge of his nightshirt drape down and hide what Kakashi had felt pushing into his god damn hatefully unresponsive groin, what he could still smell getting all sticky and warm and *so fucking almost within reach* if Naruto would just stop being such a needlessly cautious little shit!

"Okay," he said with a devious grin, slowly licking his lips and silently crowing at the way Naruto's eyes followed his tongue with a voracious hunger. "I won't use my hands."

There were two seconds of silence while he tensed the muscles in his legs in an attempt to get gravity working in his favor, and then Naruto was all over him. Lips were crushed against his, devouring him just as fervently as he was returning the sentiment because he had missed this so much! *Dear god, he had missed this idiot so fucking much!* His hands were already up Naruto's shirt and scratching at his back to get the blonde groaning down his throat while he heard buttons scatter into random directions as his own nightshirt was ripped open. It was all going perfectly until there was an abrupt flash of light and that fantastically wanton creature was gone, leaving his lips and hands tingling from the chakra.

Gulping in air, Kakashi blinked at the empty apartment for several seconds, then spat out a curse and slammed his fists back against the wall behind him. The plant on the windowsill ruffled its leaves, but otherwise didn't move an inch. He glared at the impudent greenery, hating the knowledge that he didn't even have enough strength to knock Mr. Ukki the Second dangerously close to the edge of the shelf. Damn his worthless body to hell and back! He was still gasping and catching his breath, trembling a bit as the adrenaline from that brief moment of *almost* wore off and left him feeling dismally drained. It wasn't fair!

He kicked his heels into the mattress, scrubbing his face and pulling at his hair until his breathing calmed down. Plucking at his open shirt with angry disappointment, he swept his hands over the blankets to find three of the missing buttons and set them on the bedside table. Well, there was no helping it now. Naruto was well out of reach, and part of him was quite honestly worried that Naruto might follow through with his threat to haul his naked ass out of the apartment if he didn't get ready for their date in a timely manner. The word 'date' spun circles in his head, and a nervous spike of energy got him off the bed and into the washroom without too much trouble.

Getting back to his feet after sitting under the obscenely relaxing shower wasn't so easy, though, and his temper started picking up steam as he wobbled unevenly to his dresser. Snatching some standard issue clothes out of the drawers, he flopped back onto the bed to wriggle and stuff his limbs into the long-sleeve shirt, boxers and slacks. He bundled the towel under his head and lay there sprawled listlessly on his side for...an unknown amount of time, glaring up at the vacant space on his wall where his clock was supposed to be. His gaze meandered down to his untouched calendar still open to the month of October, and he rubbed his forehead as he felt the initial dull throbbing of a headache coming on.

The last time Kakashi had been aware of the date was the 5th, and he had no idea what day it was now. He hadn't pushed himself this far past his exhaustion limit in a very long time, and being injured from his fight with Gai would slow his recovery quite a bit more. Closing his eye, he focused his attention inward. Wispy golden threads were laced throughout his chakra system, humming a soothing cadence that was soft and unobtrusive enough not to be noticed unless he concentrated and looked for it.

It was typical for the pain to wake him up in a day or two and then keep him up no matter how much he simply wanted to pass out, but having that bizarre chakra constantly purring against his bones threw a wrench in the gears. The way it buffered and suppressed the pain of

chakra depletion would have definitely allowed him to sleep longer than what he was accustomed to, and he had no basis for comparison on how much it would also affect how quickly he healed. Toss in the variables of not being hooked up to an IV, or having a nurse coming in three times a day to pester him with disgusting medicine and work on healing his cracked ribs, and he truly had no way of knowing how much time had passed.

But Naruto's impatience for going out tonight was suspicious, which might mean several things. Not the least of which was the possibility that whatever kind of emergency leave he'd convinced Tsunade to give him was running out. Groaning out a sigh as his headache became more insistent, he shoved himself back up to root through the top drawer of the dresser until he found the little grey jewelry box he kept there. He sagged back down to the mattress, poking the towel into a more comfortable pillow substitute, and let his feet dangle off the end of the bed.

Opening the small box, he twined his fingers around the red threads connecting the two bells together and smiled quietly as they jingled against his palm. He had never imagined he'd get them back after he'd given them to Naruto, much less completely fixed. It had been extremely difficult crushing them deliberately simply to have an excuse to give them to the blonde, but at the time he had no way of telling Naruto what their significance was without him getting suspicious and asking too many questions. He had trusted that Tsunade would tell Naruto as much as she could when his 'mission' was completed, because his will was very specific about why that one item was to be left to the teen.

Kakashi felt his eyelid drooping too heavily for him to keep it up, and his headache was making his thoughts sluggish. He did try to stay awake, twitching his fingers so the tinkling of the bells rolling over his palm broke the silence, and his damp hair made the slight chill in the room fan over his skin. It would have been a lot easier if he'd had a clock to look at, ticking away in the background and telling him exactly how much time he had left. But Naruto had made it a decided point to make sure time didn't exist within the apartment, and maybe he could just get a quick nap in to refresh himself...because surely it hadn't been that long...and Naruto would definitely wake him up for their date...right...?

When Naruto materialized on the step that led to the entranceway of Kakashi's apartment a few minutes later with a knapsack over one shoulder and his sandals hooked on his fingers, his bubbling excitement was instantly crushed by a wave of guilt. Damn it, he was the scum of the earth, he should have known better! Sakura had told him it was going to take time for Kakashi to recover, and that he shouldn't try to push him, or let him push himself. *What the hell kind of horrible person would do this to their boyfriend when he damn well knew better!* Silently placing his sandals beneath the step, he padded over to the sleeping Jounin without letting his Biju Mode drop.

It was just that she had told him in the very beginning that Kakashi was going to be unconscious for two or three days, but he had woken up for a little while *every day*, right there in front of him where he could touch him and smell him and hear him being all stubborn and teasing and strange, *and he'd missed having the man around so much it was killing him,* and Kakashi had talked about his past and told him little dark secrets that cut his heart open and hurt so bad, but then he was smiling and laughing in that rich way that was so carefree and sly and made Naruto's toes curl while his stomach danced, *and he was moving*

around and walking on his own when he should have been bedridden, and the bastard was doing a frighteningly good job of trying to seduce him out of his pants for fuck's sake! Seriously, every man had his limitations!

He sank down to his knees on the floor so he could rest his cheek on the mattress, gingerly slipping his glowing fingers through Kakashi's hair and gently massaging the little wrinkle knotted between the pale eyebrows with his thumb. God, he hated that little wrinkle! It was like the source of all the tension, worry and pain in Kakashi's whole body. Threading the Biju chakra into the Jounin's system was so easy now he could probably do it in his sleep, and after a few minutes Naruto gave a sigh of relief as Kakashi's features finally relaxed.

He shook his head as the glowing cloak faded, idly twining the silver wire around his fingers. It was astonishing how young he looked when his face was peacefully asleep, like a decade had just fallen away and Naruto was looking at someone who was only four years older than he was. The fantasy was comforting, but there was an odd deeper comfort under the aching reality that he would outlive this fantastic man...that he could tell Kakashi confidently that he would be there with him forever. Leaning forward onto the bed, he buried his nose in the damp hair so he could breathe in the faintly herbal scent of his shampoo along with the something smoky and almost woodsy and a little dark that was all Kakashi.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," he smiled, his voice barely at a whisper. "You can always take me out another day, and I really shouldn't have pushed you so soon."

After replacing the damp towel with a real pillow, he folded his legs and settled himself against the wall above Kakashi's head so he could tuck into a late dinner.

May I just say thank you for fawning all over your boyfriend ***without*** *using Biju Mode this time,* Kurama drawled sardonically.

I did not fawn all over him, Naruto replied curtly, refusing to acknowledge the heat prickling at his cheeks. *How long are you going to hold this over my head?!*

It hasn't even been an hour since you decided to traumatize me, and I'm entitled to at least three months of retribution.

It was an emergency situation!

You woke me up to infuse yourself with ***my*** *chakra* ***while*** *you were sucking face,* Kurama said resentfully, flattening his ears back.

How many times am I going to have to apologize?! Naruto shouted, waving his arms at the fox as his face caught fire.

A lot...

You know, you're partially to blame for this whole situation, Naruto said, trying to bury his humiliation under an indignant scowl.

The fact that I thought you two were practically made for each other does not mean I have any desire whatsoever to participate in some sort of depraved threesome, you creepy little pervert.

THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT!

Your meal is getting cold, loverboy, Kurama smirked, flicking his tails over his head and effectively blocking himself off from any further communication.

Naruto seethed for a long moment, then hunched his shoulders and stomped out of his subconscious. The bento box was still warm on his lap, and he speared his chopsticks through the small grilled sardines so he could crunch on the bones with petulant satisfaction. He was about to dig into the rice when the soft dull clinking of bells drew his attention to Kakashi's subtly twitching fingers, and he saw the rangy frame shiver briefly. Crap, he hadn't moved Kakashi because he'd wanted to wait and make sure he was deep asleep. He hadn't realized Kakashi was...getting...cold...

Pinning the oblivious Kurama with a withering glare, he set his dinner on the night stand next to a small pile of grey buttons and slid off the bed. Something plinked to the wood floor, and he quickly scooped up the button before it rolled under the bed. His face burned as he placed it with the others, but he shoved the memory of how unbelievably fabulous it had felt ripping the Jounin's nightshirt open aside so he could focus on carefully maneuvering Kakashi farther up the bed and under the blanket.

Putting the bells back in their box, he swapped it out for his dinner and stretched out on his stomach so he could feel the length of Kakashi resting next to him. He knew getting beneath the blanket would warm Kakashi up faster, but he didn't want to risk waking the man up by shuffling with the covers every five minutes. It didn't take him long to eat the rest of the food, and he spent it glancing curiously at the small jewelry box. He couldn't fathom why Kakashi had brought it out.

He supposed the bells held a lot of memories, and he knew they were far more important to Kakashi than other Jounin sensei who used their own versions of the 'bell test'. He'd found that out a month after the Fourth War ended, when he'd asked Kurenai if she was going to make a rattle for the new baby from her Genin test bells. Most of the half-rebuilt stores and shops had still been working on restocking their shelves, so he thought it had been a rather brilliant idea. He hadn't expected her to laugh when she told him no one kept them for very long, and that her bells had been dented beyond repair after the first few weeks of training with Team 8.

Gnawing on the end of a chopstick, Naruto rolled out of bed to put the other bento box and the thermos of soup into the fridge before climbing into a clean pair of pajamas and washing up. Crouching down next to the bed, he pulled out the sealed medical kit and opened it with a light surge of chakra. Everything was cool to the touch, and he hesitated on pulling out the extendable IV post before he steeled his resolve and set the dreaded thing up. The benefits far outweighed the squicky feeling he got every time he had to handle it, especially since Kakashi hadn't eaten anything since yesterday.

It honestly didn't matter that Sakura had worked hours with several of his clones to teach him how to use the kit on his own. Poking needles in other people still gave him the willies. Straightening his shoulders and taking a deep breath, he hung the clear plastic bag of what he simply called 'watery vitamins' because he couldn't remember or pronounce what she called it. The moment he unwrapped the sterile needle, he channeled all his concentration into performing the horrific task ahead of him exactly as the kunoichi had taught him.

By the time Naruto was finished he felt limp with exhaustion, and thumped his head on the mattress as he shoved the medical kit back under the bed. With a little luck - which he did believe he had earned, damn it! - this would be the last time he'd have to set up the IV. He wanted to kick himself for the stupid spontaneous date idea. If he'd just made dinner right away he wouldn't have to be 'feeding' Kakashi through that blasted tube! He'd be prepared tomorrow, and he was NOT going to let the impossible man distract him from shoving food down his throat!

He crawled under the blanket and turned off the lamp on the bedside table, being mindful of the IV line as he curled in next to Kakashi's cool form so he could rest his head on the slowly moving chest. Discovering that he could fall into a deep sleep without worrying about accidentally cracking his elbow into Kakashi's face at some point had been a delightful surprise on the second evening. When his planned short 'nap' had lasted until well past dawn, he had opened his eyes to find he'd hardly moved at all during the night. Smiling quietly as he slid his palm across well defined abs to drape his arm over a waist that was, admittedly, a little too defined, he closed his eyes and let the entire world disappear except for the echoing sound of a heartbeat that lulled him to sleep.

Snaking his way lazily out of bed the next morning, he pulled Kakashi's mask up and sent a couple clones off to do laundry and some shopping from the fridge in his apartment as well as the Market District before he trundled into the shower. He knew the clone that would be returning with groceries would also bring Sakura back, and as pointless as it was to cover Kakashi's face when he was aware she had seen it already, he just couldn't help doing it. It was silly protecting a secret that wasn't a secret, but the mask was part of the man's identity, and she even said that they tried to respect his privacy about that issue as much as possible when he was in the hospital.

For a brief few seconds he considered putting on some actual clothes as he stepped out of the shower, but he shrugged and really couldn't be bothered to get out of his pajamas. It was easier to lounge around and read if he wasn't dressed to go outside, but Sakura found it absurdly amusing for some unknown reason. Well, maybe not so unknown. The bright little toads on his other pajamas were kind of funny, that's why he'd bought them. But he was wearing the tan ones with the boldly painted dark orange swirls today, so there shouldn't be any reason for surreptitious glances and giggles.

As soon as he opened the door upon hearing the politely soft knock, he gave Sakura an ugly look at her snickering and was once again insanely glad he'd fallen for a guy. Women were way too complicated and hard to understand, he just didn't get them. Kakashi was complicated, too, but not 'chick complicated'. The baffling hilarity of the situation apparently got worse when he started to make breakfast from the groceries his clone had brought, and he quietly threatened not to feed her if she didn't stop laughing at his pajamas.

"You're right, you're right," she said in a hushed voice, biting her lip as she fought her mirth. "I shouldn't be laughing at...your pajamas." Pulling the blanket back up over Kakashi's chest once she was done working on his ribs, she drew the IV line out of his arm and healed the small injury. "How much did he eat yesterday?" She asked, continuing to keep her voice low while she repacked the medical kit with fresh supplies before sealing it and sliding it back under the bed.

"I made dinner too late, he fell asleep," Naruto grumbled softly, sitting down on the floor across from the kunoichi and soundlessly put the plates down with the bowls of reheated leftover miso soup from last night.

"Don't beat yourself up about it," Sakura said, taking a drink of the soup before she tucked into the fried eggs. "He wasn't even supposed to be awake until yesterday, much less keeping down solid food. I don't know how your Biju chakra is doing it, but it's taking off an enormous amount of stress that comes with chakra depletion. That's the biggest obstacle for recovery; being in constant pain and unable to eat or rest to let your body have enough time and strength to heal itself. Just keep him in bed as much as possible."

"I know," he sighed, feeling careworn and impatient as he scooped eggs onto his toast and glanced at the sleeping Jounin.

"It's only been four days, Naruto," Sakura said sternly, rapping her knuckles lightly on his head.

"For you, maybe," he said sullenly, rubbing the top of his head. "It's been nearly a month for me."

"He's going to be awake long enough for you two to bug the crap out of each other all day before you know it, but right now sleeping is the absolute best thing for him." She paused and narrowed her eyes at him. "And if you sneak him outside, do it quietly. There are too many people still wandering around bumping into walls because they can't believe that you two have been skulking around behind closed doors."

"We didn't skulk around!" Naruto hissed, muscling his voice down from the hollering he wanted to be letting loose.

"I know that, and you know that, and all your friends know that, but people love to gossip about celebrities. Shizune-san says it'll die down pretty soon, she's been working hard on cutting off anything really nasty before it has a chance to spread. However," she glowered. "It would help a lot if you would stop avoiding everyone, especially Lee."

"I...figured he'd need a little time to cool down," he mumbled guiltily over his soup bowl.

"Yeah, well, he did," Sakura sighed, then pinned him with a sharp gaze. "But you know him well enough to understand he only needed a day at the most. He's not angry with you, he's just upset. You know how emotional he gets, and Gai-sensei has already told him everything that happened. Hell, the only people who're still roaring mad at you are me for having to spend *five hours* in the operating room gluing bone fragments together, Ino for essentially

destroying this fantasy wedding she had all planned out for you, and Chouji's more disappointed than mad that he won't get to put together a huge feast for the reception."

"Okay, two of those are so not even my fault," Naruto said with a bit of horrified disbelief that Ino and Chouji were already planning out his wedding...and getting pissed off because he'd shattered their dreams of his non-existent matrimonial future.

"True," Sakura chuckled. "But your friends are crazy, so you'll just have to suck it up and apologize, anyway."

"Alright, alright, I'll talk to them tomorrow."

"No, you should talk to them today," Kakashi said.

Naruto practically jumped out of his skin at the unexpected voice, fumbling to catch the empty soup bowl before it hit the floor.

"Kakashi-sensei, don't do that!" Sakura gasped, pressing her hand to her chest and whipping her head around to glare at the Jounin.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt a conversation going on in my own apartment," he drawled, pushing himself up and leaning his elbows on his knees as he looked down at the younger pair.

Sakura huffed and got up to sit on the edge of the mattress, flicking her hand at Kakashi to raise his arm so she could lift his shirt up. "You've been skimping on food for weeks, haven't you," she admonished, pressing her fingers along his injured ribs. "You're too thin."

"I'm working on it," Naruto said defensively, gathering up the dishes while Sakura snorted and choked on laughter.

He chose to ignore her weird sense of humor in favor of the giddy thrill at seeing Kakashi awake again, and trotted to the range so he could cook up another breakfast. After a few seconds, Sakura cleared her throat and started Kakashi's medical interrogation. He paid attention to most of it, knowing the man would be in for a world of hurt if he tried to lie to Sakura about how much pain he was actually in. She was all finished by the time he walked over with a plate of eggs and toast, and a fresh bowl of miso soup with eggplant added this time, thanks to his clone's shopping expedition.

"I don't know how long you were eavesdropping," Sakura said, sitting back and crossing her arms with a frown. "But I'll repeat myself so you can't play the fool: You are on strict bedrest, Kakashi-sensei. Emphasis on the word 'rest'. If I catch wind of you trying to push yourself, or conning Naruto into letting you push yourself, then you can look forward to MY cooking for a week."

"Duly noted, Sakura-sama," Kakashi cringed.

Sakura wrinkled her nose at the honorific, but her eyes were laughing. "Oh, that reminds me. Shishou wanted me to pass on a message," she said, leaning forward and cupping her mouth

to whisper something in Kakashi's ear.

Naruto sat down on the bed and tried to crane forward to hear what was being said, burning with curiosity because what could be seen of Kakashi's face was turning bright red as his eye widened in shock. Then Sakura gave his masked cheek a peck and stood up to leave, and Naruto was vibrating with the need to know what she had said!

"What did you say?" Naruto questioned eagerly. "What did Baa-chan tell you to say?"

"Who are you, and what have you done with Sakura?" Kakashi asked, looking completely dumbfounded.

"What do you mean? What did she say?" Naruto demanded, looking back and forth between the two as Sakura ruffled his hair before walking to the entranceway. "Come on, Sakura-chan, what did you say?!"

"Also, since the investigation came up dry your rank will be reinstated as soon as your suspension is over," Sakura said breezily, stepping into her sandals.

"Why is no one telling me anything!" Naruto shouted.

"Your fractures are healing nicely, so unless you overexert yourself you won't need any more treatment," she smirked, slipping out the door with a little wave.

Pinching his lips together, Naruto whirled on Kakashi with a silent insistence to be told just what the hell had transpired or he was going to EXPLODE!

"You sent in a request for leave while you were in Iwa?" Kakashi asked, blinking at the door.

"THAT'S what she told you?!" Naruto sputtered, scrunching his face up in confusion as he placed the meal in Kakashi's hands. "Why are you even wigging out about that? Everything worked out in the end because now we both have a month off."

"Naruto...did Tsunade-sama have you sign anything?" Kakashi asked, numbly setting the breakfast on the bedside table. "Anything you didn't read?"

"What are you talking about? All I signed was my mission report," he said, more bewildered than ever and starting to get worried. Why didn't Kakashi just tell him what Sakura had said?!

"Okay, good," Kakashi nodded, still staring at the far wall in a concentrated daze.

"Your food's going to get cold-hmmrf!" Naruto blinked as he was yanked into a desperate kiss. But his perplexed concern only kept rising because Kakashi wasn't trying to do anything with the kiss, and in just a few seconds he found himself bundled up and nearly smothered against the man's chest as Kakashi toppled to his side and tangled his arms and legs around Naruto in an almost crushing embrace.

"I'll eat it in a minute," Kakashi gasped quietly, his breath hot and shuddering against the side of Naruto's neck.

Naruto made a small noise of acknowledgment, too busy trying to figure out what the fuck was going on to come up with a decent reply. He could feel Kakashi's heart thundering in his chest, terrifyingly rapid and making his own pulse jump in fright. Kakashi was trembling, his fingers digging into Naruto's back and hair almost painfully, and he could feel the tears stinging his eyes as he buried his face in that shivering shoulder because he just didn't know what Kakashi was so afraid of! And he didn't know how much more clear he could make it that he was never going to go anywhere! How many times did he have to say it?! How many ways did he have to show it?!

As many as it took.

He scrabbled and clutched at the back of Kakashi's shirt, squirming and shoving his way even farther into the embrace until he could feel every inch of muscle shaking against him, bracing it with his own hitching breaths till that rangy frame so corded and writhing with power and strength started to rattle and crumble with a choking cough. Naruto turned his head as Kakashi took his first deep breaths, pressing his ear against his chest as hard as he could so he could FEEL the air coming in and out.

The coughing softened, and he tried to lean in even more, tried to press his ear into the bunching muscle of Kakashi's chest even farther because he could almost hear it. It was right there, echoing so hesitantly at first, clumsy and unsure. But when it finally caught hold it was like the slow rumble of an avalanche, and he squeezed the tears out of his eyes as he held his breath because he wanted to HEAR it tingling down his spine and reverberating through his whole body!

There was no way Naruto could ever explain how happy Kakashi's laughter made him, it was just one of those feelings that was so strong it was almost tangible. It was a rushing relief that challenged every memory he'd ever had of being 'happy', sweeping them up and shaking them out to dance in foolish glee as everything tumbled and thrilled and got caught up in the cacophony so much that he couldn't keep himself from laughing too. He was sniffling, and grinning like an idiot, and crying and laughing at the same time for no apparent reason, and he didn't care because *Kakashi was laughing,* sliding cool fingers through his hair and rubbing his back because he'd heard everything Naruto hadn't been able to say.

He didn't know how much time passed before Kakashi finally loosened his grip, and he was instantly glad he'd stolen the man's clock. He'd worry about time in November, but for right now October was all his and time did not matter. Shifting his shoulder so he could pillow his head on Kakashi's arm, he wiped away the crusty moisture from his eyes on the sleeve of his nightshirt, and made sure to take a bit longer than necessary so Kakashi could do the same without an audience. Naruto had shed enough tears in front of friends and enemies alike to not give a shit if anyone saw him, but the first time he had ever heard Kakashi cry was three days ago...and he had been too busy holding onto the Jounin to look.

"You're a mess," Kakashi chuckled, brushing the backs of his knuckles over Naruto's cheek.

"Yeah, well, so are you," Naruto tilted a smile, curving his neck to lean into the touch as he tugged on the front of the dark shirt.

"Not everyone's going to be happy about us being together," he said, tucking a lock of hair behind Naruto's ear.

"Meh, they'll get used to it," Naruto shrugged.

"And if they don't, you're going to beat the hell out of them like Gai and Yamato?" Kakashi reprimanded firmly, narrowing his eyes.

"No," Naruto retorted, slinking his gaze away.

"Naruto..." Kakashi said in weary exasperation.

"I sent a clone, I only hit them once, and I took them straight to the hospital!"

"Only one hit had them in surgery for five hours?!"

"...my clone may or may not have been in Sennin Mode at the time..."

"What?!"

"They had it coming!" Naruto sulked stubbornly.

"And I'll bet they just stood there and took it, didn't they," Kakashi sighed, scrubbing his face. "You and I both need to talk to some people today."

"Why can't we just do it tomorrow?"

"Because tomorrow is the 10th, and I'm a greedy little shit, so I want to hoard you all to myself on your birthday," he said, hunching over and sinking his teeth into the side of Naruto's neck just hard enough to get the blonde yelping and scampering out of bed.

"Fine," Naruto said with a dramatic long-suffering sigh, rubbing the side of his neck and fighting the urge to giggle and frolic his way to the washroom to change because, not only was he getting the best birthday present EVER tomorrow, HE WAS GOING TO GO OUT IN PUBLIC WITH KAKASHI'S TEETH-MARKS **ON HIS NECK!** Oh, he was definitely not wearing his jacket today!

When he walked back out, Kakashi had changed into some unrumpled clothes, and he was finishing up his lukewarm breakfast. Naruto sat on the floor to enter Sennin Mode so he could pinpoint exactly where Lee, Gai, and Yamato were while Kakashi washed up, and soon he was suffering through Kurama's barbed amusement as he spirited them to the hospital. There was a heavy moment of tension as Kakashi hesitated in front of Gai's door until Naruto pointed out that *he* was going to have to face a perfectly healthy and mobile Lee while Kakashi had the advantage of being stuck with a bedridden Gai. The Jounin gave him a somewhat sympathetic cringe and opened the door after Gai responded to the soft knock.

The tears flowed like rivers as soon as they were spotted in the doorway, and Naruto felt the plaster on the hallway wall cave in behind him as he was tackled in an over-enthusiastic 'brotherly' embrace. He made a mental note to remind Sakura that this had been HER idea, and he wasn't responsible for any property damages. It took a little while to get Lee calmed

down enough to where he could start attempting to answer at least some of the questions fired rapidly at him.

Far too much time had gone by before Kakashi emerged from Gai's room, slipping his arms through a Jounin vest and dryly asking Lee if he could please stop mauling Naruto. Surprisingly enough, Lee leaped to his feet and stood at rigid attention as his cheeks flushed pink. He apologized effusively for allowing his youthful exuberance to infringe upon Naruto's personal space longer than necessary in order to confirm and witness with his own eyes how deeply the passionate fires of love burned between them, but it had been such a beautiful sight that he'd lost track of time.

With that, he trotted back into Gai's hospital room and they were left with a very awkward silence as they both looked at the nurse who had stopped in the hallway due to the three men blocking her path. The air remained strung as taut as wire while her cheeks turned scarlet and she stared at them in wide-eyed speechless shock. Naruto thought she looked kind of familiar, but he couldn't place where he'd seen her before. The pale blue braid swinging behind her as she spun on her heel and fled tickled his memory, but nothing solid came of it. He wondered if he should run after her and apologize, but Kakashi said it would be better if they left her alone to gather her wits.

Yamato's room wasn't far down the hall, and when they reached it Naruto felt a cold chill race down his spine. The dark cloud of gloom hanging in the air was so oppressive it was almost visible to the naked eye. He could honestly say he had never been more creeped out by Yamato, and after giving Kakashi's shoulder a tentative pat of encouragement, he retreated to sit down in the hallway to wait. The minutes ticked by, and the wicked smug satisfaction he was basking in as the people walking by gave him - and more specifically *his neck* - startled or scandalized glances was swiftly crumpled when he saw Ino stalking her way toward him.

He had thought he was prepared to argue with her, but she tore into him with an endless tirade that made him seriously wonder if the ability to speak for great lengths of time without breathing was something they taught in secret kunoichi classes or if it was a medic nin trick. Wow, he had never seen her so irate! She didn't care how he figured out a way to marry Kakashi, but he was damn well going to do it some time in the near future because she had spent DAYS designing the perfect flower arrangements for the wedding, and how dare he not say anything to any of them beforehand! Hadn't they made their opinions perfectly clear on that stupid mountaintop years ago?!

And it didn't matter that they were mostly just teasing him because seeing him freak out was ridiculously hilarious, but he deserved it for all the trouble he'd put them through, so he better just sit there and stay quiet about that subject because he had no say in the matter anyway, and why did he even bring it up?! Besides, it wasn't like anyone would have blabbed about it, except maybe Lee, but that was because he was dense and didn't think before he said some of the craziest things, and he would have done something absurdly spontaneous to cover for his slip-up anyway, so he shouldn't be doubting or bad-mouthing Lee like that, what kind of friend was he!

Naruto was dumbstruck by Ino's confounding monologue, mouth slightly agape as he listened to her in a strange scared fascination, and he would have waved Kakashi back into Yamato's

room for his own safety if he hadn't been so completely off balance and unable to think. But it was too late, and Ino whirled on the Jounin because he was just as much at fault as Naruto was by being so mysterious and keeping secrets that didn't need to be kept from the people who cared about them, what was he thinking?!

And for that matter, he owed her a wedding too since she'd already started on some fantastic classic designs for the floral arrangements for HIS ceremony, so they were just going to have to get married twice! Period! Glaring at the two men one final time, Ino turned on her heel and marched off. Naruto blinked slowly, trying to process all that information before he simply gave up and pushed himself to his feet. It didn't help that Kurama was quite literally rolling on the floor laughing at him.

"I'm tired, let's go home," he whined, drooping his shoulders and leaning his forehead on Kakashi's collarbone.

"Good idea," Kakashi chuckled, combing his fingers through Naruto's hair.

In a blink, they were back in Kakashi's apartment, and Naruto couldn't get back into his pajamas fast enough. It was like wearing them was irrefutable proof that the rest of the world existed in some sort of alternate reality far away from him. When he trudged wearily out of the washroom, he hummed in delight to see Kakashi standing at the range making tea in his extra set of pale pajamas. Snaking his arms around the taller man's waist, he buried his nose in between those strong shoulder blades and took a deep luxurious breath.

"How did it go with Gai-sensei and Yamato-taichou?" Naruto asked, leaning his cheek against the back of Kakashi's shoulder.

"I'd say better than your run-in with Lee and Ino," he said with droll humor, then paused to tap his fingers on the lid of the tea canister as he turned it over in his hands. "I actually had wanted to be angry at them for a little while longer, but it's kind of hard when one of them is in an upper-body cast and the other has his jaw wired shut. You were too hard on them."

"They were too hard on you."

"Revenge doesn't suit you," Kakashi said quietly, running his hand along Naruto's forearm.

"It wasn't revenge," Naruto said, squeezing his arms a bit. "If they had tried to run or fight back, I would have gone straight to Baa-chan so she could deal with it formally. I wanted to keep it between us, though. It was a hit for a hit, resolved on the spot without outside interference. I knew they had their reasons, and I knew they did it because they love you. There was just no way they would've suddenly turned on you like that with hateful intent, but that didn't excuse the actions they took. They beat the shit out of you when you didn't have a leg to stand on. They knew what they did was unthinkably cruel, and they knew there would be consequences for it."

Kakashi stayed silent for a moment as he put the tea canister back in the cupboard, then tilted his head back with a sigh. "We really do have crazy friends, don't we."

"Absolutely psycho."

"How did you find out it was them?"

"Kurama told me."

Tattle-tale, the fox snorted.

Shut up, you tattled first!

Kurama rumbled a chuckle and closed his eyes.

"He's been pretty helpful," Kakashi said neutrally, pouring the tea and turning to hand a glass to Naruto.

"Yeah, but he's a sadistic asshole about it," Naruto shrugged, stepping over to the bed to sit down. "The second I saw you all beaten up I asked him if he could sense someone's chakra on you, but he kept saying he'd tell me in a minute. I didn't know what was going on, you'd lashed out with an insane flare of bloodlust and the four of us were just scrambling to get there before the world exploded. He only told me who it was after you'd passed out."

Kakashi lifted his eyebrows and folded his legs as he sat down on the mattress, then looked down into his tea for a thoughtful moment. "I grew up being taught that the Biju were nothing but monsters and demons. That they were intelligent malicious animals that had no conscience or feelings. I tend to forget that you have another *person* inside you," he said, reaching out to place his fingertips over Naruto's stomach in a way that sent an aching zing through the blonde and had Kurama snapping his eyes open with an unreadable expression. "So, what does Kurama think about us being together?" He asked, drawing his hand back and taking a sip of tea.

Don't you dare... Kurama growled, narrowing his eyes to slits at the devilish irreverent grin spreading across Naruto's face.

"He likes you," Naruto said with a soft cackle.

"Your evil smile doesn't really instill a lot of comfort after hearing that," Kakashi said warily.

I will kick your narrow ass across the continent if you don't stop right there.

"He thinks you're the coolest, strongest, sexiest-"

THAT'S IT! Kurama bellowed, snapping his tails out to send Naruto careening across the room.

"-ow!" Naruto winced, doubling over with laughter as he rubbed his upper arm where the fox had flared his chakra to give him a faint burn.

"Naruto, it's not nice to antagonize a being that is capable of destroying half the planet," Kakashi said dryly, taking Naruto's tea cup before he could spill it and set both cups on the night stand.

Kurama gave a self-righteous flick of his ears and turned away completely to snub the blonde.

"It was worth it," Naruto snickered without a shred of remorse, watching as Kakashi pushed up his sleeve to look at the burn. It was an angry red patch, but it wouldn't blister and he knew it would be healed in a few hours. "Seriously, though, he does like you. Not, you know...THAT way," he amended at the Jounin's flat look of denial when he got up to rummage through his dresser for a first aid kit. Which was kind of silly and pointless, but Naruto wasn't going to complain about the attention because the thought of it made his insides feel kind of fuzzy and warm, and he knew Kakashi wouldn't listen if he tried to refuse the treatment anyway.

"But he says we were made for each other." Naruto paused for a beat, tilting his chin and lavishing in the fluffy heat burbling within him that only intensified the pleasant feel of cool fingers spreading soothing ointment on his burn. "Everyone's always telling me to respect and listen to my elders, and there's no one older than him. So, I'm inclined to believe him."

"The fox that's lived a thousand years thinks I was made for you, huh?" Kakashi said with a ghost of a smile, his eyes hidden by his bangs as he screwed the lid back on the jar of ointment.

"Yep," Naruto said with bright conviction.

The words that he wanted to say immediately after got caught in his throat, though. In a split-second the thought of saying 'I was made for you' brought nothing but the memory of Kakashi's voice snarling and screaming and broken as he blamed himself for everything with unforgiving flawless logic, shattering in his arms because the man had spent so many years silently carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Some wildly possessive frantic part of his brain swiftly supplied him with an alternative, urging him to lean forward and gently bump his head against the side of Kakashi's neck so the Jounin would listen without shying away.

"As much as you're stuck with me, I'm stuck with you, too," Naruto grinned, and his ears rang with another memory of that same voice schooling him with the words 'a shinobi needs to see underneath the underneath'.

"Whether I like it or not," Kakashi whispered, resting his chin on the blonde hair.

"And you totally like it, so don't even try to deny it," Naruto huffed playfully, tilting his head up to butt lightly at Kakashi's chin as he sat back with a haughty expression. Whatever he opened his mouth to say next was interrupted by an excessively loud noise coming from his midsection, and he felt his cheeks flush. "You're probably hungry by now, so I'll just fix us some lunch," he mumbled, grabbing the tea cups and skittering to the 'kitchen' so he could drain his own glass and refill them both with the last of the tea in the kettle.

"Always so impatient," Kakashi murmured in Naruto's ear, making him drop the teapot heavily on the shelf next to the cups as he jumped at the sudden presence standing right behind his shoulder. "And you said *I* was an easy target here," he chuckled, sliding his fingertips up Naruto's forearm as the blonde turned his head to glare at the taller man.

Of course, the glare didn't last more than half a second because his brain was hazing over with the tingling heat spiraling up his arm and winding its way through his chest to coil in his gut. He was aware of his mouth trying to say something witty, but all that came out was a random collection of words that didn't really make sense because he simply could not figure out how it was even possible that winding a bandage around his arm could be considered foreplay. Somewhere in the back of his mind he tried to build a logical explanation, but it was difficult with a leg brushing the back of his thigh, and his pants were getting tight, and Kakashi's hip was almost but not quite bumping into...just...damn it why was he just out of reach!

A quivering shudder fizzled through every inch of Naruto when arms wrapped around him, sneaking fingers under his shirt to trace little patterns of ice and fire over his waist, stealing his breath and his thoughts and tripping his heart into a faster pace because there was a lean body corded with muscle flush against his back to support him while lips danced at the edge of his ear whispering something he could only barely comprehend above the howling shriek of his blood that was already responding to the words, making him reach up behind him to grab and pull harshly at the fabric of Kakashi's nightshirt because dear sweet god he wanted it *so fucking bad!*

He could feel every movement of Kakashi's hands, his nerves writhing and begging for more, already hypersensitive, but the cool fingertips sliding across his hot skin intensified it to an agonizingly delicious degree because his chest was aching and burning with a desperate need to have that man devoting ALL of his attention to him, swallowing him up and drowning him in the feel of having someone closer to him than humanly possible. Lifting his heels off the floor he pushed back insistently against the rangy body so he could feel MORE, his eyes fluttering shut as he felt teeth and lips and breath against his neck.

A tongue traced that wickedly sensitive spot along his throat that had him throwing his head back, arching up onto his toes and curving himself farther into the embrace, abandoning his own sense of balance and stability because Kakashi was there to anchor him and hold him up. The heady groan that shivered through him when his groin was finally relieved of the cloth restraining him prompted him to roll his eyes open and blink muzzily at the ceiling. Something was missing. There was something he was supposed to be thinking about, and he couldn't remember what it was.

It seemed to be important, but it wasn't nearly as important as clenching his fists in the top of Kakashi's nightshirt so he could try to drag the man closer when he was already braced against him so well that he could feel his heartbeat against his back. But that tiny nagging voice pecked at him like an annoying bird when all he wanted to focus on were the lazy fingers caressing their way down his hip and up the inside of his thigh while that sinfully glorious deep voice rumbled in his ear and through his chest, leaving him gasping and keening as he parted his legs and dug his shoulder into Kakashi's collarbone, gripping his nightshirt for dear life.

The infinitely sublime moment those fingers just began to close in on him from above and below, his eyes snapped open wide and realization crashed into him.

"Stop!" Naruto choked, sucking in air as he stared at the ceiling. A huge contingent of his abruptly rallying resolve melted and withered as Kakashi's fingers left his skin instantly, hovering an inch away from where they had been.

"Why," he breathed, hot against the blonde's ear and sending a shiver down his spine.

It was the way Kakashi stated it without asking, his tone almost coy with an echo of that crooked smile, that had Naruto fumbling to come up with an answer. Concentrating was getting difficult as Kakashi chuckled softly and nibbled at his ear, and Naruto could feel his eyes wanting to roll back as his body melted into the sounds and sensations. He bit his lip hard, reminding himself of one specific sensation that was NOT present while he was snugged flush against that body.

"You're still recovering," Naruto said. He was attempting to be firm, but his voice wavered in his own ears, as if he was grasping at straws to come up with weak excuses.

"Then give me some incentive to boost my morale," Kakashi purred against his neck, darting his tongue out to trace the bite mark he'd left earlier, and Naruto couldn't tell if it was his own body that was sending the little electric bolts down his spine to make his knees feel rubbery or if it was Kakashi.

"But you-"

"Want this," he said huskily, his voice pitching lower.

Naruto's eyes rolled back at the sound, his thighs rattling because there was a mouth at his neck and cool fingers whispering against his skin where he was scorching hot, and it was like he was having an out of body experience. There was a fingertip languidly tracing the head of his weeping cock as he gasped out a shuddering noise, while at the same time the tongue against the sensitive spot on his throat followed the same exact movement, and the world felt upside-down in the most fabulous way.

When Kakashi wrapped his hand around the throbbing muscle, Naruto actually managed to lift his feet off the floor for a moment, every scrap of him arching back and fighting for control as his toes curled and his knuckles turned white hanging onto Kakashi's nightshirt. He gurgled out a cry, fumbling to get his feet back on solid ground while his pants were tangled around his ankles because he'd been waiting for this for SO FUCKING LONG, GOD DAMN IT! And there were fingers gently rolling his sack and leaving him a trembling mess because those fingers were stroking him so slowly it was torture.

He wanted to buck his hips into Kakashi's hand, but couldn't because there was an arm over his thigh holding him back against the body that was leaning forward and forcing him to hunch over slightly. The delicate sinking of teeth into his shoulder had him pushing up onto his toes again, and now that Kakashi was leaning in it was so much easier to feel every twitch of muscle against his back. He knew he was stuttering out nonsensical babble, but his brain and his body just weren't cooperating! One was screaming FASTER while the other was too busy singing and surrendering beneath the utter perfection of those long nimble fingers.

There was no way he'd ever be able to do this on his own, this frenzy of bliss was something only Kakashi could bring out in him. He would never be able to build and build and BUILD his anticipation of release until he was a quivering wreck unable of coherent thought. This was all his Kakashi's doing. HIS Kakashi! White spots danced behind his eyelids as he felt the coiling MOUNTAIN of euphoria starting to crackle at his nerves, and on a whim he opened his eyes to look down.

Wayward strands of silver hair tickled his sweaty face and stuck there, and out of the corner of his eye he could see Kakashi licking his lips and grinning like a wolf while his focus went straight down to what Kakashi was looking at: pale fingers wrapped around his swollen red member, slightly glossy and sliding up and down with a slick wet noise, splaying out when he reached the head and tracing every inch of the whole length to leave nothing untouched, nothing unexplored, devouring him with his hand alone. His release slammed into him with a force that stopped his breath and darkened his vision almost to the point where he couldn't see. Almost.

Through the black patches clouding his eyes he watched Kakashi quickly bring up his other hand to cover the head and catch everything so he could continue to stroke and massage and reduce Naruto to a shivering puddle rippling with aftershocks that just didn't seem to want to stop. Heaving in air and blinking a startling amount of moisture out of his eyes, he refused to let his knees fold and drop him into the boneless pile of goo he felt like. It wasn't easy, though, and he let out a sigh of relief when Kakashi braced him with an arm around his waist and straightened back up.

Lolling his head to the side, he clumsily wriggled his fingers loose from the light blue nightshirt and let his arms flop down as he sagged back against the taller man. His brain was still foggy, sated and satisfied and unable to come up with a single word to say, much less string a bunch of them together to form a sentence. His only real thought was idly wondering if he should offer to go get a towel to clean Kakashi's hands. Was that the polite thing to do?

But then Kakashi was bringing his hand up and licking his fingers clean, licking HIM off his fingers like he'd just finished eating dango without a skewer. Naruto's cheeks caught fire, captivated by the sight on a perverted level he never knew he had in him, because wasn't this scene supposed to be kind of gross and uncomfortable? Not that he was one to talk, because he could clearly remember enjoying the taste of Kakashi in his mouth, salty and musky under an odd creamy layer of sweet. He swallowed and resisted the urge to lick his lips, the heat in his face shooting down to his belly as Kakashi pulled the last finger out of his mouth too slowly and looked at him hungrily from a hooded eye.

"Thanks for the meal," Kakashi said softly, tilting a cocky grin.

Naruto felt his dick twitch as his body jolted with a tingling surge of energy, his mind whirling with a very long list of sauces he really REALLY needed to learn how to make. Soon. Like...TOMORROW!

"Is that an invitation for dessert?" Kakashi asked, lifting a brow and resting his chin on Naruto's shoulder as he slid his eyes downward.

"No!" Naruto retorted in a strangled voice, coming to his senses as his stomach clenched in a conflicting tangle of giddy anticipation and cramping hunger. "You will go wash your hands, and then sit back down on the bed and STAY THERE while I make lunch," he scolded, squirming around and steering Kakashi toward the washroom so he could pull his pants back up without the threat of the Jounin's interference. "Why are you harping about dessert, anyway, I thought you didn't like sweet things."

"You taste more spicy and salty than sweet," he smirked, licking the fingers of his other hand with a deliberate show of how he was savoring it as he lingered in the doorway to the washroom.

"...I do?" Naruto blinked, watching Kakashi with far too much fascination.

"Yep, it's rather nice."

His traitorous face warmed up again, and he turned on his heel as he felt the movement in his boxers. "That's...um..." What the hell do you say to something like that?! He scowled over his shoulder as Kakashi's smug chuckling mingled with the sound of the faucet, then concentrated on the task of cooking in hopes that his 'growing' problem would die down. "Damn it, stop distracting me! I have a meal to prepare!"

He continued to grumble at Kakashi, and himself, and the food as he whipped up a quick batch of fried rice from the leftovers in the fridge. Thankfully his plan worked, and after he'd plated the food he was able to turn around without an embarrassingly obvious tent in his pajama bottoms. He sank a few inches when he saw Kakashi slumped against the wall with his head bowed and the early afternoon sunlight just starting to creep through the window. The victorious announcement for lunch died on his lips and he glanced at the plates, quickly swapping out the chopsticks for spoons and placing the meals on the end of the mattress before darting back to retrieve the tea.

"Hey, you haven't been asleep for very long," Naruto said, crawling onto the mattress and setting the cups on the windowsill. "You won't get angry if I wake you up, right? Because you really need to eat." He slid his fingers through the wild silver hair to brush it away from Kakashi's eyes and raised his voice slightly. "Come on, wake up. I made lunch."

"Hmm?" Kakashi grunted, cracking his eye open and blinking groggily as he lifted his chin. "Ah, sorry, I didn't mean to fall asleep," he said with an apologetic smile, kneading subtly trembling fingers into his forehead.

"Why don't you ever take your own advice?" Naruto admonished with a sad smile as the guilt tightened in his chest. Slipping into Biju

Mode, he reached out to smooth his fingertips across Kakashi's forehead so he could bolster the dwindling supply of Biju chakra within the Jounin. "You're always telling me not to be impatient, and then you go and do something stupid like...that," he flicked his gaze away for a second as his cheeks flushed, then looked back with a scowl. "And now you're all worn out."

"It was worth it," Kakashi grinned, cupping Naruto's face with one hand and stroking his thumb over the glowing cheek. "And I had no idea you could actually blush in Biju Mode, it's surprisingly attractive."

Yeah, okay, he's stable now, so I'm cutting you off before you start getting lewdly creative with ***my*** *chakra,* Kurama groused, yanking his chakra back to drop Biju Mode forcefully.

Hey!

Call me when you're done fondling each other. I'll have you know that I can still smell your previous activities on you, he chuckled devilishly, flipping his tails over his head before Naruto could lash out his reply.

"Kurama willingly gives you his chakra in Biju Mode," Kakashi said slowly, tilting his head in thought as he continued to caress Naruto's rapidly darkening cheek. "Which is slightly different than Kyuubi Mode, where you use an isolated captured store of his chakra." He paused and started to laugh with impishly contrite humor. "He got mad, didn't he."

"Pretty much..." he said ruefully, rolling his eyes and turning his head quickly to kiss the palm of Kakashi's hand before he shuffled back so he could retrieve their food while it was still hot. "Now, shut your mouth and eat," he ordered, shoving a plate into Kakashi's hands and ignoring the amusement glittering in the Jounin's eye. "We can talk about all this stuff later, it's not like either of us will be going anywhere anytime soon," he said between mouthfuls of rice. "And you still have to take me out on that date! But we can do that tomorrow after I pick up some stuff at the Market. The weather's supposed to be nice, so the spot I'm taking us to will still be perfect."

"I have to admit that I'm a little confused about how I'm taking you out on a date that you're preparing the food for and taking me to," Kakashi drawled, taking a drink of tea to wash down the fried rice.

"Do you want to take me out on a date?"

"Yes."

"If we went to a restaurant, would you be the one cooking the food?"

"No, of course not."

"Would you be able to walk there by yourself?"

"Well...no, not at the moment."

"Then what's so confusing?" Naruto shrugged, taking the empty plates and setting them on the night stand "I'll get the food ready and bring us to a nice quiet spot so you can take me out on a date. It makes complete sense."

"Only when you say it," Kakashi shook his head, sinking down into his pillow and reaching up to drag the blonde down as well. "Why is that?"

"It's because you common pedestrians just can't understand my brilliant genius," he said with a haughty dramatic sigh, tugging at the blanket and draping it over them. "I'm so far beyond everyone, you all just wrongfully assume I'm last."

"You're so cute when you use big words," Kakashi cooed, wrapping his arms around Naruto's indignantly stiffening frame as he buried his face in the blonde hair.

"Shut up!"

"I'm looking forward to it," Kakashi whispered after a few seconds, sliding his palm up and down Naruto's back as he shifted so the shorter man could wriggle himself in close to his side and settle his head in the hollow of the Jounin's shoulder.

"To our date?" Naruto asked, looking up and suddenly finding himself having to swallow hard against the tightening in his throat and crushing aching whine in his chest at the tender expression on Kakashi's face. He had to blink several times to clear the abrupt moisture from his eyes when cool gentle fingers traced his temple to tuck a lock of hair behind his ear, then slid lazily down the edge of his jaw.

"Yeah...that too," Kakashi said quietly, a ghosting smile pulling at his lips as he tipped Naruto's chin up and gave him a languid kiss. "You should get some sleep."

"S-says you!" Naruto sputtered, squirming forward and tangling his legs in Kakashi's as he bullied his head under the man's chin so he could hear the steady thump of his heart as he rested his ear just beneath his collarbone. "You need more sleep than I do, so shut up and close your eyes!"

"Yes, dear," he chuckled heartily, snaking his fingers through Naruto's hair and slipping his other hand up the back of the tan nightshirt to trace idle soothing designs against the small of his back.

Naruto squeezed his eyes shut and let the reverberations of that beautiful sound shiver all the way down to his toes, while the weird springing feeling in his stomach at being called 'dear' again - regardless of the fact that it was said in jest - amplified the giddy fluffy stupidness washing through him. As Kakashi's breathing slowed to the rhythm of sleep, he smiled and let his thoughts drift in the hazy warmth of being curled under a blanket in the autumn sun. They were incompatibly compatible, imperfectly perfect, all of it so sideways and upside-down at different angles that somehow everything fit right.

He knew they would argue and fight and it would be a tug-of-war on a lot of things, but the notion actually thrilled him. Kakashi kept him on his toes and challenged him, while at the same time he was this oasis of calming comfort and security that Naruto could retreat to when all he ever seemed to do was flail around and splash in the water. But that was okay, because Kakashi needed to be hauled out and dumped into the waves every once in a while where they could both bask in the sun and get sand in their pants.

Sleep crowded into his mind with shuffling determination, and he smiled because it honestly didn't matter what the rest of the world thought. He'd grown up defying generations of ingrained hatred until he proved himself, forcing everyone to open their eyes, and he was

perfectly capable and willing to keep right on doing just that. Because he knew...in the end...he was right where he was supposed to be...and so was Kakashi.

Chapter End Notes

I know what you're thinking. 'HOLY SHIT, THAT WAS A LONG CHAPTER!' Right? Well...to be honest this is a bit longer than what I feel comfortable posting, but I was also running out of chapter title and there was just no way to break it up. *facepalm* So! Here you are, with the longest chapter EVER. And if you read it all the way through, you should probably go see your dentist tomorrow to check for cavities due to the obscene amounts of sugary fluff.

I regret nothing, though! I worked my ass off to get to this point. I EARNED IT, DAMN IT! RAWR! XDDDDDD

And I bailed on the warning for that kitchen scene, I'M SO SORRY IF I TRAUMATIZED ANYONE! But it had a pretty obvious lead-in, so it should have been easy to skip. I really needed that author's note at the beginning to be the only thing up there so it WASN'T easy to skip. =P

Hehe, okay, on another note, I said I would explain the title for chapter 12! I realize that lyrics are a no-no unless they're public domain...and I did think that these were right on the cusp. But I was looking at the wrong country for public domain rights. Still, the lyrics are already in the main title as well as some of the chapters, so I'm going to post them here anyway. At least send me a PM if you're going to tattle. Give me a chance to rename the story before the ax comes down and everything is deleted.

The song 'The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game' (c) Smokey Robinson, and was first performed by The Marvelettes in 1966. Personally, I find Massive Attack's version unbelievably fantastic. Seriously, it's like listening to chocolate. Tracey Thorn has a voice that is liquid sex, making you think of those old smoke-filled juke joints where men wore fedora hats and pinstriped suits, and the woman up on stage had diamonds in her hair and pearls around her neck, wearing a low-cut dress that went all the way to the floor with a slit in the side up to her hip. We should all propose to her.

Now, the lyrics should basically explain themselves, but I'll add my two cents down below. The first half of the song is pretty much Naruto, and the second half is Kakashi, though they both alternate a bit throughout the story.

===

'The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game'

Every day brings change,
And the world puts on a new face.
Certain things rearrange,
And this whole world seems like a new place.

Secretly I been tailin' you,
Like a fox that preys on a rabbit.
I had to get you, and so I knew
I'd have to learn your ways and habits.

Oh, you were the catch that I was after,
But I looked up and I'm loose in your arms, and I knew that I was captured.

What's this whole world comin' to? Things just ain't the same
Any time the hunter gets captured by the game.

I had laid such a tender trap,
Hoping you might fall into it.
But love hit me with a sudden slap,
One kiss, and then I knew it.

Oh, my plans didn't work out like I thought,
Cause I had laid my trap for you, but it seems that I got caught.

What's this whole world comin' to? Things just ain't the same
Any time the hunter gets captured by the game.

===

The thing that captivated me about this song, and made it perfect for the story I had already started to write on my computer one random day, was the duality of it. There are two hunters and two games, and they both get caught by the 'prey' they were hunting or the 'trap' that they'd set. If a hunter gets captured by the game, doesn't that make the game the hunter...while the hunter is actually the game? I love the confusion and surprise, because that is how real life works. There is no straight-line rule with us silly humans when it comes to love.

Speaking of love...

I LOVE YOU ALL! =DDDDD

No, really, I do! For any one of you that hit 'bookmark', or 'kudos', or left a comment, or even just stopped by to read this 10,000 page novel, you guys make me squeal with glee! =DDDDDDDDDD

Okay, that's enough from me. :3 Happy Chinese New Year! XD

Epilogue: Three Little Words

Chapter Notes

Haiku (c) Matsuo Basho

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Epilogue:

Three Little Words

While Kakashi still hadn't quite fully grasped the convoluted logic of how he was the one taking Naruto out on a date when the blonde was the one cooking the meal, choosing the spot where they would eat, as well as literally taking them both there, he also wasn't about to give himself a headache trying to figure it out. Besides, it was Naruto's birthday, so in that respect it made perfect sense that he was the one to pick where he wanted to go and what he wanted to eat. Unfortunately, the only contributions Kakashi seemed capable of offering was a small blanket to sit on, a thermos of tea, a bottle of plum wine - which Naruto had technically paid for... - and a few miscellaneous items he was fairly sure he'd be able to make use of.

When they arrived in a secluded little nook along the top of the Hokage Monument cliffs half an hour before sunset, he smiled and shook his head as Naruto trotted forward to the drop-off and flung his arms out wide with a beaming grin. Kakashi had to admit it was the perfect spot. The spires of rock and scattered trees afforded privacy and a decent windbreak, and the area itself was borderline inaccessible to anyone but a Jounin or someone capable of flight. Walking to the edge of the cliff as he hooked his fingers under the strap over his shoulder, he looked out across the village and stuffed his other hand in his pocket.

"Best view in the whole world," Naruto preened, setting his own knapsack down and sidling up next to the Jounin.

"That it is," he chuckled, leaning over and nipping at the back of Naruto's neck. "Glad I thought of it."

"Pfft, whatever," Naruto snickered, nudging his shoulder into Kakashi's. "You'd have picked somewhere just as good."

"True. We'd have been eating take-out in my apartment, but I still would have gotten the best view in the world," Kakashi said smugly, kissing the end of Naruto's nose as he scrunched it up in confusion a

moment before his blue eyes widened and his face blushed scarlet. "Mmm...that color does suit you," he grinned, dragging the tip of a finger across the bridge of Naruto's nose and over

his darkened cheek. It was an endless well of delight being able to fluster the young man so easily.

"Sitting on the floor and eating out of a disposable box is not allowed on Date Night," Naruto sputtered, drawing himself up in embarrassed indignation.

"It's downright adorable how you say 'Date Night' like it's a national holiday," he teased, playfully ruffling the gold hair. "Are there any other rules and regulations that I need to be aware of before we commence with the ceremonies?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact there are," Naruto growled, making a valiant attempt at scowling while his lips twitched and curved in frustrated amusement. "The first rule is that we will never, under ANY circumstances, miss Date Night."

"Well, that's a pretty intimidating first rule," Kakashi said, taking a deep breath against the torrent of logic looming over him and telling him that agreeing would just be lying. He glanced out at the village before looking back at Naruto, something inside him breaking at the glimmer of unsure hesitation in those eyes. "But if it's going to be an annual event on this night, then we should both be able to pull enough strings to make it happen," he smiled softly, tugging the shorter man into his arms and convincing himself that he really did have the ability and resources to make it home for Naruto's birthday every year.

"That's right, we will," Naruto sighed in relief, resting his cheek in the hollow of the Jounin's shoulder as he looped his arms around Kakashi's waist. "The second rule is that we take it seriously; absolutely no cheap pre-packaged cardboard meals, and no take-out if it can be avoided. If we're going to get food from a restaurant, then we should eat it there."

"You do realize that includes cup ramen, right?" Kakashi drawled, letting the fingers of one hand trace idle paths across Naruto's back.

"Cup ramen is-"

"A *pre-packaged* cardboard meal in a disposable box..."

"Damn it, fine! I am willing to make that sacrifice for one day of the year, so you better appreciate it," Naruto huffed, tipping his chin up so he could glare at the man. "The third rule is that all other rules will be made up as we go.

"And the punishment for breaking the rules?"

"No 'dessert'."

"Ouch, that's cruel," Kakashi winced.

"Then you better follow the rules," Naruto smirked, unwinding his arms and reaching for the knapsack on the ground. "Why don't you have a seat, and I'll-"

"Nope," Kakashi said, yanking Naruto back and spinning him around so he was facing the open view. "I'm the one taking you out on this date, remember? So, you have a seat over here,

watch the scenery in that direction," he said, pointing out at the village. "And *I'll* get everything set up."

"At least let me help with-"

"Rule number four: No peeking," he interrupted again, gripping the top of Naruto's head and halting him from turning around.

"Why, what are you going to-"

"No 'dessert'..." Kakashi murmured against Naruto's ear, fighting back the urge to cackle and nibble at the swiftly reddening lobe.

"Stupid rules," Naruto groused, hunching his shoulders and flumping to the ground so he could dangle his feet off the edge of the cliff and bang his heels on the rock. "Rule five says we can argue against any unfair rules."

"You can argue all you want to as long as you don't peek," Kakashi said amiably, digging into his knapsack for the blanket so he could spread it over the ground just behind Naruto. "And asking Kurama to spy for you is cheating," he said, grinning at the guilty little noise coming from the blonde. He placed the drinks and cups on the blanket before continuing. "The same goes for clones or summons."

"How do you do that?!" Naruto demanded resentfully.

"I told you before, you're transparent," he chuckled, stepping over to pick up the bag with the food and tapped the top of Naruto's head with his finger. "I can hear you thinking."

"Oh yeah? Well, then you can just listen to this," Naruto grated, folding his arms and falling into a petulant sulking silence.

Kakashi set the bento boxes out and hummed thoughtfully as he rifled through his knapsack for the stack of marker tags he'd taken from his mission supply pouch. "While I'm not saying I'd never like to give bondage and hardcore sadomasochism a try...it's a little early in our relationship to be jumping right into the rough stuff, don't you think?" He mused wickedly, then pitched his voice into a coy scolding tone. "And you call *me* a pervert."

"THAT IS NOT WHAT I MEANT!" Naruto railed, steam practically smoking from his ears.

"This coming from the man who gave me page 30 as a 'prize for the winner'," Kakashi replied with droll humor, placing the rectangle pieces of paper around the blanket and activating the seals on them with a minuscule flare of chakra so they glowed a warm orange. They were designed for use in caves and unlit tunnels, so they would last a few hours before the stored chakra within the seals burned out.

"Th-that was different!"

"'Why so scrawny, cat? / Starving for fat fish or mice... / Or backyard love?'" Kakashi quoted dryly, taking out a pair of senbon needles and piercing them through the center of the blanket a few feet away from each other.

"I meant the circumstances were different," Naruto grumbled.

"How so?" Kakashi laughed, wrapping two of the marker tags around the ends of the senbon before activating them.

"Do you still have it?"

"Of course I do," he replied, standing and tilting his head so he could eye his work critically. Well, it wasn't exactly a romantic candle-lit dinner in the traditional sense, but it was a fair substitute.

"Do you still have the other two?"

Kakashi couldn't answer, the words got caught in his throat and he had to swallow them back down where they settled like a hard lump in the center of his chest. He looked at Naruto with a sad dawning surprise that ached and burned like frostbite under his skin, and he stepped over to the seated figure. Naruto was looking down over Konoha, absently tapping his heels on the cliff side with his hands loosely laced together in his lap. The sunlight was turning everything bronze, and suddenly it all felt ethereal; beautiful and frightening.

An irrational part of his mind started to get genuinely scared that if he reached out to touch Naruto, his hand would pass right through him. It didn't make sense, it was absurd, but it didn't stop the shiver of fear that got his heart stumbling into a quicker pace. Even though Naruto was the transparent one, Kakashi knew *he* was the ghost. Ghosts weren't supposed to be able to exist in the sunlight, which was why it was so terrifying, but he could feel himself being drawn in like a moth to a flame as the silence continued to hum in the air.

It was peaceful here, right on the borderlands of chaos and nothingness where ghosts could walk in the sunshine, and he let himself be pulled in by words that weren't spoken and the actions that weren't made because Naruto had a gift for radiating and broadcasting his feelings without ever having to make a sound or move a muscle. Or maybe he was just good at reading the blonde. Kakashi smiled and sat down behind Naruto so he could slide his legs over the edge of the cliff, wrap his arms around that warm solid body, and lean in to breathe in the scent of *life*.

"Of course you do," Naruto chuckled softly, melting into the embrace with complete surrender.

"You know me too well," Kakashi said quietly, languishing in the sensation of having that vibrant body sinking into his arms and fitting so perfectly against him.

"No, I don't," Naruto grinned and canted his head back to look up at the Jounin. "But I'm working on it."

Kakashi drank in the sight of that smile for a moment, not bothering to hide the tender echo quirking at his own lips. "The food's going to get cold," he said, counting on Naruto to get them both up and moving because he sure as hell wouldn't mind staying just like they were forever.

"Then get up, you goofball," Naruto ordered, squirming and untangling himself so he could push the both of them to their feet. "I worked hard on dinner this time, and we're not going to...eat it...cold..." His words slowed to a stop as he stared at the little picnic, a delicate shade of pink creeping across his face.

"In that case, please allow me to show you to your seat," Kakashi said, feeling a ridiculous surge of giddiness as he took Naruto's hand and swept his other arm out with a flourish. Naruto almost tripped on the first step he took, but he recovered with a bright excited laugh and was instantly dancing forward to pull Kakashi down to sit on the blanket. "I take it that this means rule four won't be argued against and stricken from the books?"

"Well, I'll probably argue against it every time," Naruto shrugged helplessly, grinning from ear to ear as he crossed his legs and almost bounced in place. "But it's definitely there to stay."

"Glad to hear it," he said as he poured a modest amount of plum wine into two cups. "I realize you still have a year to go before you can legally marinate yourself in alcohol, but if this is an official date, then we should have an official toast with an official drink."

"What should we toast to?" Naruto asked, taking the offered cup and sniffing the contents curiously.

"It's your birthday, you pick something."

"Hmm..." Naruto narrowed his eyes contemplatively for a few long seconds, then nodded once and straightened his shoulders as he held out his cup. "This is a toast to you."

"Eh?" Kakashi blinked, his hand stopping just shy of tinking their glasses together, and he felt some of the wine splash onto his fingers at the abrupt halt.

"For giving me the best birthday present ever," Naruto said, tilting a smile that made Kakashi's insides turn to a mushy pool of heated goop.

"I...didn't actually get you a gift..."

"The sixth rule," Naruto said, shifting forward onto his knees and hooking his elbow around Kakashi's forearm. "Is that a toast cannot be disputed," he continued, his smile hitching into a softly playful angle as he pulled the Jounin toward him.

"Ah...well..." Kakashi trailed off as he felt an embarrassing flush of color prickling at his cheeks, then laughed and shook his head before leaning into the gentle insistent tug on his forearm so he could hook his elbow at Naruto's properly. "Alright then."

He took a sip of the wine as Naruto did the same, relishing in the awkwardly comfortable position. The whim struck him randomly as he let his gaze linger on the way Naruto tended to almost kiss the rim of the cup. Without a second thought, he darted his free hand out to grip the back of Naruto's neck as he lunged forward and captured those lips before Naruto swallowed. Not that he was an avid drinker, but in that single moment he could honestly say that plum wine had never tasted so good.

While the rest of the date didn't go flawlessly, it did follow an imperfect winding path of feeling just right. The clouds in the distance that allowed the sunset to paint the sky with a vivid array of stunning color rolled in to block the stars as the wind shifted. They were chased home by the sudden cold rain, and spent the remainder of the evening curled under the blankets to stave off the rapidly plummeting temperatures outside. Kakashi made sure Naruto stayed very warm, and took his time licking the sweat off his skin when things got too hot. It felt like he was snuggled under a kotatsu when they both finally dropped off to sleep with their limbs tangled and wrapped around each other, and it made him feel deliciously muzzy and drunk despite knowing it had nothing to do with the one glass of wine he'd had hours earlier.

When Naruto's clone returned the next morning with a fresh set of clothes, he also brought an envelope that had been slipped under the door to the young man's apartment. The card and accompanying four page letter that Iruka had written absorbed Naruto's attention for the better part of an hour while Kakashi made breakfast, and he was okay with it. Iruka was a very special person in the blonde's life, and he was never going to compete with that. So, he truly did understand on some deep level when Naruto looked up with teary smiling eyes and simply said 'He knows I'm happy!'.

The following weeks were, without a doubt, the best and most awkward Kakashi had ever experienced. One of the defining moments was while he was out shopping by himself, when the little old woman at his favorite vegetable stand actually stood up on the crate she used as a chair and started throwing a collection of unsellable wrinkled potatoes at a trio of youngsters making snide remarks literally right behind his back. What was even more shocking was the diminutive grandmother's unparalleled accuracy and unexpected strength if the wailing complaints of the retreating teenagers were anything to go by. He offered to pay for the wasted vegetables, but she shook her head and tossed an extra eggplant into his bag with a satisfied toothless smile.

Things settled into a rhythm of grudging acceptance from the people who were most opposed to the open pairing after a few months, when hateful rumors continued to be brought viciously to task so they were stopped, and it remained clearly obvious that neither of the men were going to break off from the relationship, nor were they going to run rampant throughout the streets fornicating in public and corrupting the younger generation. Although, there was a small faction - mostly made up of women - that were somewhat disappointed by that... Regardless, the world did not end. War did not break out. Trade relations with other villages and countries did not stop. Life simply went about its business and kept plugging along, heedless of the fact that two somewhat famous people had decided to spend a great deal of time together.

They both made it back to the village for Date Night the next year, and for five more years after that there was only one time that they were forced to break the rules and eat ration bars behind the muddied walls of an emergency shelter several hours from home. Dessert that night was just being able to see each other for a few minutes, crusted and weighted down with the tragedy and muck of trying to rescue people from the mud slides and floods ravaging the countryside. Kakashi thought Naruto's eyes had never looked so blue, shining from his dirty face with an unbreakable will and coiling readiness to get right back out there into the thick of things.

Naruto thought Kakashi had never looked so strong, covered in mud with his shoulders straight and his head tilted subtly to listen for the call that would send them out into the never ending rains again. The alliances carefully cultivated over the years proved their worth in spades that terrible autumn, and every hidden village answered Tsunade's plea for help. The following year she announced her intention to retire, and on October 10th Uzumaki Naruto was officially indoctrinated as the Rokudaime Hokage at the age of 26.

After the ceremonies were over, Naruto retreated to his office. And holy shit it was HIS OFFICE! The fact that he'd chosen all the furniture, and had moved everything into the room two days before did nothing to dampen his soaring elation at knowing THIS WAS HIS OFFICE AS HOKAGE OF KONOHA! He took a deep breath, flicking the brim of his wide hat so it canted at an impish angle and swept his hands down the sides of his robe. He'd stayed with the traditional white on the outside while the inside was dark brown. But the rich orange trim of flames at the cuffs of the long sleeves reached up to his elbows, and the ones at the bottom hem came nearly to his waist, so he was more than pleased with the compromise of tradition and his own style.

Now...if only Kakashi would hurry up and get there for their date, his day would be perfectly complete. Leaning back against his desk, he tipped his head back and gazed impatiently at the ceiling. He could just feel the whisper of chakra coming from the two ANBU agents hidden up there, and he knew it was because they were deliberately sending out little pulses like heartbeats to let him know they were there. He chewed on his lip thoughtfully, wondering when he'd be able to read and remember the individual chakra signatures so he could identify the invisible operatives without having to call out and ask for their names.

Speaking of names, he was going to have to brush up on his mythology about real or imagined animals if he wanted to carry on the weird ANBU naming tradition Konoha followed. He had just pushed off the desk with a frustrated sigh when the two ANBU abruptly spiked their chakra as if startled, then cycled it down with calculated deliberation before they vanished completely. Naruto scowled and sifted through his memory. He was pretty sure that signal meant they had gone off duty...or at least that they weren't going to hover over his head anymore.

He huffed and crossed his arms. They could have at least told him why they'd left, because he sure as hell didn't have the whole rolodex of subtle codes they used memorized yet! He felt the air pressure change behind him, and he whirled around in surprise, his robes flaring out around his legs. ...but there wasn't anyone there. What the hell was going on?! He opened his mouth to start demanding answers of the walls when he caught the reflection in the window just over his shoulder. His mouth stayed open and his heart sped up, but not a sound came out.

No. Fucking. Way!

He had to keep blinking and refocusing on the reflection, a large part of his mind insisting that what he was seeing wasn't real. It had taken him two years just to get Kakashi to tell him what his codename in ANBU had been. He shook his head, his brain continuing to deny everything until he finally gave up and turned around. It had taken three more years before the man was comfortable enough to be in the same room with the ANBU mask on open

display next to his fish tank. Doubt crowded into his head as he gaped at the tall figure decked out in grey and black, and he darted his gaze to the fish tank setting on a small table next to his desk.

The mask should have been there, he'd put it there. He'd seen it when he'd walked into his office, he clearly remembered that! But it wasn't there, and a little chill ran through him because now he couldn't remember what the ANBU standing right in front of him looked like! FUCK! Whipping his gaze back to the man, he sagged a bit in relief. He knew that mask, he knew that hair, and he knew every damn inch of that body. But even as his eyes strayed down to drink in the enticing sight, his mind hit the panic button again, second-guessing what he'd just seen because he couldn't quite remember the pattern painted on the mask or the hair color clearly.

Logically, Naruto knew that his bizarre inability to hold onto details about what KAKASHI looked like was a trick that all ANBU were trained in. It was a manipulation of their own presence and chakra, dimming everything down to present themselves to the world in a state of near non-existence. Any ANBU was capable of walking down the middle of a crowded street in broad daylight without anyone noticing them, and if someone did, they never remembered anything significant. That's because an ANBU was a shadow's ghost, and only another ANBU would be able to really see them when they were trying not to be seen.

He shivered and bit his lip, the almost creepy but still thrilling excitement of hovering on the edge of being just not quite absolutely certain that the man standing in front of him was in fact Kakashi made his skin prickle with goose bumps as his pants got uncomfortably tight. Fighting the urge to order Kakashi to take the mask off and stop messing with him brought another tingling thrill. He was the Rokudaime *Hokage*. He had *command* over this man. He could tell Kakashi to do *anything,* and he would obey. The uniform wasn't there for show. Kakashi was ANBU, his will and his life were in the palm of Naruto's hand.

It was a heady feeling, trickling up his spine and whispering in his ears because he had never held so much power over a person before. And, seriously, what he wanted to do at that precise moment was command Kakashi to ravish him on every available surface until he couldn't see straight, because it was incomprehensibly unfair that the man was just standing there in front of him like sex on legs! He blinked to get his eyes to stop straying and making him continue to question the validity of the vision in his office, and his gaze landed on the ceiling. ...oh, dear god yes...EVERY available surface...

The insanely strong desire to lean back and insinuate himself against his desk with just the right movement so his robes fell off his shoulders was ruthlessly quelled. For over seven years he'd been fantasizing about this, and he'd never once said anything. Stretching out his arm, he slid his fingertips up the center of the flak jacket and hooked them at the top.

"Yosuzume," Naruto grinned, letting the name roll of his tongue with so much heat he had to lick his lips. "Summoner of the Okuri-Inu."

"Hokage-sama," Kakashi replied, his voice rich and rumbling with offers of every conceivable fantasy the blonde could come up with...and a wealth of so many more he couldn't even fathom because his brain was not working right.

Naruto's mouth dropped along with his shoulders, and he was dimly aware of feeling the material of his robe slide down to his elbows. "Oh my god, I'm screwed," he said dazedly. "I'll never be able to hear that title without needing a desk to hide behind."

"I apologize for any trouble I've caused you, Hokage-sama," Kakashi purred, moving forward with so much liquid grace that Naruto couldn't even recall the exact moment he had backed up and sat on his desk with Kakashi's gloved hands resting on the hardwood surface. "Is there anything I can do to make up for it?"

Naruto felt a breathy gasping laugh escape him that was on the verge of maniacal, and his brain just COULD NOT EVEN COMPUTE THIS DREAM COME TRUE! "You are so going to fuck me on the ceiling tonight."

"What?!" Kakashi laughed, straightening up and lifting his ANBU mask so it was perched on the side of his head.

"I don't know!" Naruto wailed, yanking his fingers at the top of the flak jacket and thumping his head into Kakashi's chest. "I can't even think! I just got everything I've ever wanted my whole life, and all I really want to do right now is sprawl out on the desk and tell you to have your way with me!"

"Well, I think I can arrange that," he chuckled, sliding his hips in between Naruto's thighs and lifting the blonde's chin with a finger. "But first I have to give you your present."

"Does it involve sex?"

"Unfortunately, no," Kakashi said dryly, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a familiar little jewelry box.

"You're giving me the Genin test bells again?" Naruto asked in confusion, holding out his hand.

"There was something I couldn't tell you when I gave them to you the first time," Kakashi said, placing the grey box on Naruto's palm. "These are the same bells your father used to test my team."

Naruto jerked his head up, his eyes widening as his fingers clenched around the small box.

"He gave them to me when I was recovering in the hospital after Rin's death," Kakashi continued quietly.

Naruto dropped his gaze back to the jewelry box and traced the seam before opening it carefully, too many feelings winding through him to make a response. And that was okay because he knew all Kakashi wanted at the moment was for him to listen.

"Minato-sensei received them from Jiraiya-sama when he passed his Jounin exam."

Naruto tried to blink back a haze of tears as he stared at the contents of the box in stunned silence, but it didn't work. His cheeks got wet and his breath hitched as his chest tightened with a flood of emotions he couldn't begin to try to explain. Biting his lip to try to stop it

from quivering, Naruto shook his head and kept reminding himself to take deep breaths so he could calm down and wrap his mind around all of it. His stupid fingers betrayed him and trembled as he picked up the red string, the bells jangling in his grasp.

"The Sandaime Hokage-sama passed them down to Jiraiya-sama before he left the village," Kakashi said, taking the empty box and setting it on the desk.

Naruto quickly wiped his eyes on his sleeve, trying so hard to pull himself together so the bells would stop bouncing and making a ridiculous amount of cheerful noise. It was difficult hearing the history of the frighteningly delicate bells he had first scoffed at so many years ago, it made him want to just cradle them and somehow absorb their legacy. But the real problem was getting his damn hands to stop shaking long enough so he could work on untying the dark silver ring from the red threads.

"So, it goes without saying that this is very very precious to me," Kakashi whispered, trailing his fingers over Naruto's quivering hands and slipping the ring over the blonde's finger so the bells rested against the back of his hand with a sweet tinkling sound.

Naruto coughed out a laugh, his whole body tingling and buzzing at the feel of the wide band of cool metal settled over his finger. He could already sense it warming to his skin and thrumming as his nerves clattered so much that his chakra was spiking. It was the same kind of metal Asuma's knives had been made of, so there was no risk of it getting damaged when he used his rasengan. The impossibly bright, clear, PERFECT orange gem almost glowed where it was inset within the dark ring so it wouldn't catch on anything. It was practical and masculine. It was an ordinary flashy topaz in a metal band that had no significant value outside of a shinobi weapon's shop. It. Was. PERFECT!

"And I know that I can trust you to keep it safe, right?" Kakashi asked, taking the ANBU mask off his head and reaching out to drop it gently into the fish tank where the reeds billowed and wrapped around the painted ceramic surface as the goldfish swam in frantic circles at the sudden intrusion.

Naruto smiled at the mask, knowing it was never going to leave that fish tank until he had to clean it. It had been returned to the water and weeds that he'd pulled it from, but now it was safely within reach where it could bask in the sunlight. Taking a deep shaky breath, he looked up at Kakashi and slid his fingers across the pale cheek, twining his fingers in the wild silver hair with the bells jingling against the back of his hand. His smile widened at the feel of Kakashi leaning into the touch, and Naruto tilted his head as he said the three little words that silly, stubborn, beautiful, and surprising man just couldn't seem to hear often enough.

"It's a promise."

END

Chapter End Notes

[OMG, you guys have no idea how excited I am to be able to say that this story is COMPLETE! XDDDDD That means no more updates here for 'Things Just Ain't the Same...' However...I do have nefarious plans for a few shorter multi-chapter stories that will be a part of this world, as well as some one-shots. But! That will come slowly, cause I need a little break after taking this epic journey. XD

Ah, a little note on the goofy ANBU names I've been using! Onigawara are the Japanese equivalent to a gargoyle, they're the creepy ogre faces and scary animals you see on the rooftops of temples. Yosuzume and Okuri-Inu are actually a connected pair of mythological 'demons'. Yosuzume are a flock of sparrows that chirp and swarm around travelers walking through forests or down remote paths at night, the name can be literally translated into 'night sparrow'. While they, themselves, cause no harm, their presence announces a much deadlier threat; that the Okuri-Inu is nearby.

Okuri-Inu is translated as 'sending-off dog', and what it does is stalk you all the way down the path at night until you've reached your destination. However, if you happen to trip while you walk, it pounces on you and rips you to shreds. It's a ferocious enough creature that all other wild animals and monsters stay clear of it, so as long as you keep your footing and don't stumble along the path you'll make it home safely. I really want to explain why I chose Kakashi's ANBU name, but it's kind of a big part of one of those little multi-chapter additions, and I don't want to spoil it. =P

I would like to again say THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU to anyone who muscled their way to the end of this story! I GIVE YOU ALL CYBER-KISSES AND E-HUGS CAUSE I LOVE YOU THAT MUCH! AND HAPPY NEW YEAR! XD

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